THE DEAR PRETENDER

ALICE ROSS COLVER

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Bruce Was on His Feet Staring Down at Her

THE DEAR PRETENDER

BY

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The Dear Pretender

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To

CAROLYN ROSS DOCKSTADER

The Dear Pretender

CHAPTER I

"MISS CARTER!"

Nan, hanging her hat on the small overcrowded rack provided for the stenographers at Dorf and Zuckermann's, repressed a slight start at the abruptness of the summons. She turned to face the owner of the voice.

He stood, a thick uninviting figure, in his shirt sleeves, mopping a scowling forehead beaded with perspiration. Beneath the handkerchief were dark eyes, concentrating in their depths an ill humor that had become fixed in the lines of his face.

"Yes, Mr. Dorf." Nan's pleasant face held no trace of the repugnance her employer stirred in her. "I am quite ready."

She picked up her pad and pencil and followed by the commiserating glances of her fellow workmen, moved swiftly through the door marked Private. As it shut upon her, the tension in the room she had left lifted.

"Glad 'twasn't me late," murmured Phœbe Carr as she patted her well padded ear puffs and glanced down at her revealing skirt complacently.

"Old man's going to raise hell to-day," prophesied the office boy, shifting his chewing gum with a noisy smack. There was a note of jubilant excitement in the words. Raising hell meant at least a change in the monotonous routine of things.

Nan, seating herself without fuss by the desk before which Dorf had heavily sunk, found herself stiffening for battle. Dorf, always disagreeable, had in his manner this hot morning a particular menace. His quiet, as he fumbled about his cluttered desk for papers, was the quiet before a gathering storm.

"Late again this morning, Miss Carter." It was flung sidewise at her, an accusation demanding an explanation.

Nan's shoulders lifted ever so slightly.

"There was a hold-up in the subway," she said evenly. He might believe it or not. It was the truth.

"Humph. Yesterday too?"

"No." That was all she would give him, because this man would never understand the simple fact of her lingering at her boarding house to do what she might for a woman taken suddenly ill. Nan was polite but uncommunicative.

"Nine o'clock is the rule in this office." The

voice grated on Nan's sensibilities. "Anybody who comes trailing in when they—please, does it just so long and no longer. Get me?"

The tide of anger that swept up in Nan startled her. She knew suddenly that sometime something in her would break loose, and fly openly at Dorf, not beat silently against him. Used as she was, after twelve months' service here, to this man's coarseness and rudeness, she found it jarring on her afresh this morning. As a rule he accorded her a politeness of sorts, a contemptuous deference for which Nan had been grateful. It marked at least a discernment of the difference between finely bred Nan Carter and the other stenographers.

But Nan's gray eyes were calm and undisturbed, hiding successfully the hot flash she had felt. There was no use in showing it, no use in risking the loss of twenty-five a week. Not at this time anyhow, with sister Betty facing the expenses of a doctor's bill and a new baby, with David needing a suit of clothes ——

Her unruffled demeanor irritated the man anew. He plunged into dictation, growling through it at a terrific rate of speed. Nan's fingers flew, her whole self strung taut in the necessity for swiftness and accuracy. She strained her ears in an effort to understand his thick utterance, not daring to pause for

thought, not daring to interrupt. An hour of this and she was dismissed with peremptory orders to "get 'em out at once."

Nan's face was white when she returned to her typewriter. The heat instead of flushing her seemed to drain her of strength and color. Her smoke-gray eyes, always big, seemed larger, her fringing lashes and fine curving brows blacker in contrast to her pallor.

"Pretty fierce, was he?" Phœbe's low-toned query held a note of sympathy. She liked Nan. Everyone liked Nan. In spite of the looks of her she was no snob, and her hair was real gold,—not fixed up a bit.

Nan nodded. Her smile, a little weary, flashed about the room. It had a way of lightening dusty corners, dispelling irritation. Subtly the atmosphere changed as Nan's head bent over her work. A sharpness disappeared; there was a laugh or two. Nan, unaware that she was the cause for a creeping harmony, was only glad to be here in this room with its clutter and dirt and noise, rather than back in the cooler room with Dorf.

Two hours later she carried the letters in to the man. There had been a noisy conference in here, an angry exit. Miss Ferguson had fainted from the heat in the outer office and Phœbe had produced

sardine sandwiches at noon. All these incidents, added to her difficulty in deciphering her own shorthand, had put Nan on edge. It was with a sigh of relief that she laid the pile beside Dorf and turned to go.

Luncheon on a day like this was not to be thought of. Nan's stomach revolted. The sidewalks blazed up at her a heat as intense as that which came blazing down. She hurried to one of New York's little parks. Here at least was shade, the restfulness of green, if one could overlook swarming, squabbling children.

For an hour Nan rested, musing. Was she always and forever to do this sort of work, she wondered? Would she never find the road to her heart's dream? If only she knew how to go about hunting for it—— But what she wanted was so unusual that an opening would come only once in a lifetime if it came then. In the meantime she must work to live. She threw her head back, lifting her face to the glaring blue far overhead. How many others were there doing what they didn't want to do? How many others were there with need keeping their feet on the earth and desire struggling to wing them to high open spaces?

A clock on a neighboring church roused Nan from her self-absorption. With dismay she saw it

was one o'clock. What had come over her lately to be so careless of time? Breathless and panting she arrived at the office to find it in a stir of excitement.

Zuckermann had come in with an irate customer. Someone had mixed up a large order of his and his business henceforth would be transferred elsewhere. Zuckermann was furious, Dorf's grim ugliness a fearful thing. Miss Ferguson was to blame and she had been fired, half sick as she was, and quite regardless of her long record for good work. Everyone was nervous. Sudden silences fell as doors opened. Breathy groans of relief were heard as doors shut. Nan, thankful that her late return was unobserved, slipped quietly into her place.

Her relief was short lived.

"Miss Carter back yet?"

The question held the knowledge of her lateness. Nan, with some trepidation, once more faced Dorf in his office. There was a triumphant leer on his face but strangely enough, he made no comment. Nan felt sure that his restraint boded no good for her. He was holding back for some purpose. Thrusting some letters at her he briefly ordered them typed again. There was heavy sarcasm in his aside to Zuckermann.

"Maybe some people are too good for this office

but they're not so good they don't make a million mistakes."

Nan flushed and paled. This was certainly undeserved. Never once had she flaunted a belief in her superiority to the people about her. In real humility she had worked at first, feeling keenly her inexperience in the business world, giving generously admiration and credit where they were due. She had improved swiftly and steadily. Her pride and determination had managed that, but she had also succeeded somehow in retaining her modesty. If she had drawn aside, it was a shrinking taking place entirely within herself. Outwardly she was a good mixer.

She took the letters and returned to her place. A fly buzzed persistently about her damp forehead. The odor in the small office of orange peel and chewing gum and warm, wet bodies grew more nauseating. Twice the room rocked and billowed before Nan's tired eyes.

At last she was done and trembling with fatigue she stood before Dorf, her gray eyes in a set white face, meeting his narrow gaze quietly.

"Now little girl, I'll give you a change of occupation. Just take this packet and run down to ——— Street and ask for Mr. Katz."

So this was what he had kept silence for. He

knew Nan's unwillingness to go on errands. Her refusal had settled the matter early in her career there. Her cool look measured his slitted one for a while. Within her something was swelling and swelling.

"I am not an errand boy, Mr. Dorf. I am a stenographer."

Nan heard herself in some surprise. Her spirit unafraid of consequences had broken loose at last.

"You're not, eh?" The heavy threatening face on a level with Nan's moved closer. "No, I know you're not. But Charlie's out on another trip and you like to be obliging. I'm sure you do when you know how much it means to you." Nan's mind registered the implication but slid over it. "This is important. It's got to get to Katz within an hour. I'm considerate to give you a chance to make up for coming late. Are you going?"

"No."

A little grunt came from the man. Then his face reddened darkly.

"All right, but I'll tell you one place you *will* go. That's out of this office quick."

A torrent of angry abusing words fell on the stunned girl. She gathered that she had been constantly late, always careless, indifferent to office

rules and office courtesy. Courtesy! At that she laughed aloud and moved toward the door.

"Shall I go now?"

"Yes, now!"

Dorf was shouting at her. Nan reminded him that four days' pay was due her. He made out a check while she went into the outer office and put on her hat. Amid a stupefied silence she met Dorf at his door, gave him a straight, direct look and said clearly with unmistakable sincerity:

"Thank you very much for discharging me. I'm much more glad to go than you are to have me."

Her nod and smile as she gave it to the others in the office held nothing but joyous relief. She *was* glad to go. She was not feeling this a dismissal but an escape.

In the subway on her way up-town she faced the situation fearlessly. She was out of a job, in the middle of the summer, with no reference from the one place she had worked. Her room rent was due in two days and because Nan had succumbed to the lure of an eider-down baby blanket for Betty, she would be unable to meet it.

Having no home to go to, she couldn't go home. The box of a room on the third floor of the boarding house was all that Nan had called home for a

year. Of course, Betty would be awfully glad to have her come up to Connecticut, but with David there, and a trained nurse coming so soon, there wouldn't be space. Besides she couldn't live on the kindness of her married sister, who was having financial troubles of her own. Pride and consideration forbade that. Betty was giving their brother David a home till he finished High School. That was enough. No, clearly Nan couldn't go to Betty. Couldn't even write her of her dilemma, for fear of disturbing her at this time.

The twins, Bob and Harold, were boarding like herself and Ben was afar West. That ended Nan's family. She had no one she could call a friend in the whole city of New York.

As Nan got off the subway she bought a newspaper. She would run through the "want-ads" as soon as she had reached her room and had cooled herself. There might, there just might be an opening somewhere waiting for her. Usually somebody wanted a stenographer.

At that Nan found herself in open rebellion. The spirit that had broken loose in her before Dorf, that had made her meet his gloating over her disaster with cool indifference, was raging in her, possessing her. She found herself declaring she would not be a stenographer again. She would not settle

down to a work more than distasteful to her. She would do what she *wanted* to do, somehow, someway.

Bright-eyed, a little breathless but with this daring new determination hardening in her she finally reached her room. It was not attractive, even with Nan's personal possessions warming and coloring it, but it had been a refuge from detested toil and Nan had grown to love it. It boasted a narrow white iron bed, a white bureau with a cracked mirror, a table that served as desk, one chair and one window. Nan's pictures on the whitewashed wall and the gay cretonne curtains and bed covering saved it from dreariness.

She flung up the window, pushed back the curtains and leaned out. Below her lay one of New York's hottest streets, its narrow width a clutter of small humanity swarming to noisy play. Shops bulged their wares onto the sidewalks where fat women sat in stolid untidiness. Bits of paper, swirling in a hot breeze, fluttered up, then down again. Truck carts rattled by, vendors shouting their wares. A sickening odor of overripe fruit was borne up to Nan and she turned back to her room wrinkling a small nose in disgust.

She slipped off her hat and dress, bathed her face, neck and hands and then, in a light kimono,

stretched herself on her bed with the paper. She would run through the "want-ads"—there was time before dinner—and if there was nothing there of interest—she would—yes she would—put one in herself. And she would not offer her services as a stenographer.

With a practiced eye she ran down the list. A few stenographers, many cooks, any number of general houseworkers were desired. Nan sighed, frowned, then laughed. She laughed because she was young and untried and ignorant; because this was the first time she had ever gone job hunting; because her predicament offered adventure, a new freedom, sweet for all its danger; and myriad fantastic solutions for an imaginative mind such as Nan's. She laughed and was gloriously unafraid, serenely confident, irrevocably determined not to return to the business world.

Saturday came and Nan, firmly established in the affections of the landlady, received permission to stay a week longer. It was magnanimous, for Mrs. Brent possessed a sharp nature covering a softness that none in the house but Nan had discovered.

Nan, a little anxious now, a little sharper eyed, was sweetly grateful. She had learned a good deal in two days, had Nan, and though she still did not

regret the chain of circumstances that had led to her dismissal from Dorf & Zuckermann's, was still firm in her refusal to return to an office, she nevertheless appreciated the regularity of a weekly pay envelope from whatever source it might come. Daily visits to employment agencies, nightly scanning of a dozen newspapers jogged Nan's courage but not her faith. Somewhere in the world was the empty place she wanted to fill, the work she wanted to do.

Sunday night Nan very earnestly worked over an " ad " she intended to run in the papers for a few days. It was a desperate chance, this spending of her next to last dollars, but something had to be *done*. Waiting, and watching were only doings of a sort. She must actively take a step to procure for herself what she so desired.

By Wednesday night Nan was hanging to her belief in the eternal allrightness of things out of sheer stubbornness. Three days left for someone to answer her ad. Three days more in which she might see one that appealed to her. After that—Nan, wondering herself,—laughed a little.

She has always believed it was the laugh that did it. Laughter always sets the Hard Luck Fairies to scampering, always acts as a clear summons for the Good Luck Fairies to gather about. But of

course her laugh did not put the advertisement in the paper. It was there all the time, next to hers, so startlingly close as to seem a direct answer.

Hers was making its appearance for the last time, a simple clear request.

"Wanted—a position as Mother in a family of wealth and refinement. References given. Interview requested. Address H. A. Carter—c/o Evening Sun."

And below it she saw a heaven-sent reply dovetailing to her need.

"Wanted—a lover of children to act as pseudo-mother to a boy and a girl. Education, tact, patience and culture are the only requirements. Salary generous. References asked and given. Answer XYZ c/o Evening Sun."

Nan rose from her bed, wonder and excitement lighting her like a flame.

"I knew it," she whispered. "I've always known it. If you wait long enough and want hard enough dreams do come true."

It was a delicate task, this answering of the advertisement. Nan wanted it to be unique, desired it to stand out clearly among the others that she knew would pour in to XYZ. It must interest and pique so that an interview would result.

She used up sheets of paper, scribbling away in

her hot little room, but nothing quite satisfied. Finally an idea came to her. She cut out the two advertisements, pasted them together on a clean sheet of paper and then wrote quite simply,—

DEAR XYZ:

The first advertisement is mine. The second is yours. It seems to me that they answer each other. May we not make sure in an interview?

Yours very truly,

(Miss) HANNAH-ANNE CARTER.

CHAPTER II

NAN had clung to her dream through many years, clipping it here, adding to it there as she had matured, until now it was as clear and shining and whole as a bright new penny.

What she wanted was a husbandless home and fatherless children and enough money to buy herself the clothes she had been denied in her aching girlhood. The home was to be filled with every luxury man could devise, and it was to be hers by right of her position as mother make-believe; the children were to be a curly-haired girl and a sturdy-limbed lad and were to be hers by the conquest of love; and the money was to be hers in payment for her intelligent, loving services.

If it sounds selfish you must know that it was not calculatingly and deliberately so. It was the nature of events, not the nature of Nan that had twisted a husband out of her dreams and had left her undesirous of the difficult adjustment to wifehood and the physical discomfort of motherhood. There was a reason back of it, the reason being a deep-rooted and sincere distrust of men. In Nan's brief experience they had proved themselves cruel in their betrayal of friendship, ruthless in their material greed and in their wanton robbing of

women. All men were like that. Oh, Nan knew! Her whole life told her so. Men were not to be trusted, therefore not to be liked, and certainly not to be loved or married,—not by Nan Carter at any rate.

Nan's first glimpse into the selfish souls of men had been on a wintry night many years ago.

Never would she forget that dreadful time when her father came home from a place called BUSINESS and forgot to laugh. He stood knee-deep among Nan's younger brothers—there were so many! wee David, toddling Ben and the boisterous twins of four,—his face strange, his voice stranger as he said to Mother:

"Fight's over, Mother, and I'm beaten."

Nan looked for signs of combat on Daddy and was mystified to find none. When the twins fought one of them always got bloody. Daddy explained later, when sister Betty and her brothers were all in bed, that it was his heart that was bleeding inside him, because he was beaten in the game of life and a dream was broken.

Nan was surprised at this. Did grown-ups dream too? About wishing wands and fairies clothed in dresses like milky moonlight? She waited trying to fathom this new look of hurt and defeat in the eyes so like her own.

Then Daddy explained some more. How his dream had been to put on the market a machine that he and another man had spent years inventing and which was at last perfected; how just as they had been ready to do so, a combination of companies, knowing about this new machine and wanting to share in the profits it would make, had decided to force Dad's company to join them; how this had angered him so he had decided to fight the Trust; and how for three years he had played a losing game, seeing the Trust steal his best customers from him because they could afford to undersell him; how at last his money was all gone, his business wrecked and his hope of marketing the machine more of a dream than ever.

The bitterest part of it all had been the discovery that one of the men—a friend of Dad's, whom Dad believed to be the largest stockholder of the new trust,—had apparently voted with the rest of the men to force Dad to join or quit. Dad had felt sure his influence could have avoided the catastrophe.

Nine-year-old Nan thrilled with sympathy and throbbed with hate. She did not, of course, grasp all the business details. Two facts only were clear in her child mind. First, letting the Trust share the profits of a machine you had helped invent was

as bad as letting someone else name your baby. Dad *had* to fight. Second, having lost the fight, it meant, instead of broken bones or a bleeding nose, that they would all have to leave their lovely big home, move away to another town and squeeze into a tiny house without anybody to cook for them or cut the grass or be nurse for the children. Nan would have to be nurse and Mother would be cook and Dad would cut the grass.

That is just what happened.

While it was new it was quite fun. They all made a game of it. But as the days went by and Mother grew first silent and then bitter under the daily drudging toil, life became a thing of aching endurance.

For four years Nan did the work of a woman. Out of school it was her business to care for baby David, the twins, Ben and Betty. Nan liked the responsibility of this big task. She had an immense capacity for loving babies and a strangely mature wisdom concerning them. Day after day Nan briskly organized the play with an authority that was never questioned. She gravely administered justice and settled disputes. She capably washed hands and tied shoe-strings, tenderly bathed bumps, lovingly sang songs and patiently told stories. Most precious reward after hours of such tiring

service that wearied her slim little body, brushed the fairy grace from her movements and painted shadows under her brave gray eyes, was Dad's dear hand resting on her head and his look that dove deep into her heart and set it trembling, as he said,—

"You blessed Nan-shine! We couldn't get along without you. You stand things better than the grown-ups."

It was true, for Nan's imagination aided and abetted by Daddy-dearest readily transformed shrunken, faded clothes into splendid raiment, bent and broken shoes into magic boots, a bare, shabby yard into a garden inhabited by fairies. At present they were all under a spell cast by the Hard Luck Fairies—a spell that imposed work and deprivations and sordidness,—but in time the spell would be broken and the Good Luck Fairies would come trooping back bringing wealth, space, leisure and grace of spirit such as Nan remembered and longed for.

But the worst thing the Hard Luck Fairies had done was to bewitch Mother. Nan was deeply troubled over it and she could find no way to aid in breaking the evil charm that was woven about her. The fairy that did it kept on doing it,—carving ugly lines in her face, putting sour words in her mouth, dragging at her hands and her feet until she became

as gnarled outside as inside. Nan and Daddy discussed this happening at length, with sorrow rather than anger, with pity rather than fear. And it was the things that Daddy said at that time that stayed by Nan through many years to come.

"There are Hard Luck Fairies and Good Luck Fairies, you know, Nan-shine," he told her, "and if the Hard Luck Fairies once get a grip on you it's difficult to shake them off. The best way to hold them off is to keep smiling."

"You really *do* believe in fairies, don't you, Daddy?"

"I really do," he told her gravely.

"And dreams?"

There wasn't a moment's hesitation on the part of the man whose life dream had gone to smash.

"And dreams," he said steadily.

"But yours didn't come true."

"It hasn't yet, and probably I will never be the one to make it come true. But if it's a dream worth having, it'll come true some day."

"Then dreams that aren't worth having don't come true?"

"Well, you couldn't blame the good fairies for not making them come true, could you?"

"But Daddy—yours?"

Daddy reflected, meeting the earnest, questioning

gaze of the little girl at his knee, who was trying so hard to reconcile Fancy and Reason.

"Perhaps I was selfish about mine. Perhaps I should have shared it with the Trust. Perhaps that's why I can't be the one to make it come true." Then he took Nan's little hands in his big ones and his voice deepened. "You will have lots of dreams, Nan-shine, but keep the dearest one a dream of service, if you can. The fairies will back you in it every time, I'm sure."

Soon after this the long years of strain and work snapped something in Daddy. A lingering illness finally took him from them and Mrs. Carter was left to battle with life for her children.

By putting a fairly large mortgage on the little house the Carters were able to struggle along but it was difficult business at best and Nan, growing up, found life perplexing. One could not always change the facts of living for the fancy of dreams. One had to face the need for food, the anxiety of illness, the terror of unpaid bills, the increasing ugliness of her mother's temper worn out by worry and work. Nan tried to shut her ears to daily complaints but the acidity that had become habitual to the older woman could not but have its effect on her. She came gradually to believe that the men who had ruined her father financially had been in-

directly the instruments of his death. With this belief came Nan's first glimpse into the depths of her soul. If this were true then she hated those men as greatly as she had loved her father. She said nothing, but the hatred was born and nourished by the words of her mother.

She came to believe too that if a man's friends weren't to be trusted, certainly strangers weren't; that the only way to go through life was to regard with dark suspicion and intense dislike all those of the male species. Mrs. Carter practiced faithfully what she preached. Nan, shrinking, listened to squabbles with butcher and grocer; sharp-voiced bargaining over counters; soft-footed spying upon plumber and carpenter to see that idleness was not being paid for. Nan despised this way of living. She hated the worn little cottage where their lovely old mahogany furniture was such a sad misfit. She remembered distinctly her first home, its cool spaciousness, soft colors, gleaming floors and woodwork, remembered and craved it with the fierceness of a young girl's desire for luxury.

Nan at fourteen was a contradiction. There were battling in her two impulses, the one an impulse to slump to the dinginess of her life, accepting it as her inevitable lot and growing bitter of speech like her mother; the other a winging desire to believe in

a beauty and loveliness that must some day be hers, because she wanted it so. Day by day Nan's great gray eyes darkened in mutiny at the cramping of finances, the denial of pleasures belonging to youth, the dreariness of greasy dish water and worn-out cut-over clothes, for she was a very human little girl. But the memory of her father always helped her to close her lips against audible rebellion and her inherited ability to dream kept her spirit brave and sweet.

At first Nan's dream was simply to get back into a place of beauty, to a house where she might have a room to herself and need never wash dishes. But gradually there was added to this desire for a home, a desire for money and babies. Somehow, somewhere, Nan would acquire a couple of children who would be as much hers as though they really were!

When Nan was eighteen a sharp, short illness ended Mrs. Carter's struggle with life. Before any of them could realize the danger, it was over and Nan, clear-eyed, courageous and hopeful, faced the world with her adoring brothers and sister Betty pinning their faith on her. Her years spent in playing mother now stood her in good stead. They accepted her decisions and judgments regarding their future as they had accepted her settlements of childish squabbles. They were all to finish High

School, if they had to sell every stick of their beautiful old mahogany furniture to manage it.

It was the furniture incident that sharpened Nan's general dislike and distrust of men into a keenly personal emotion. A wealthy neighbor, a collector of antiques, hearing of their want, bought almost all they were willing to sell. At the time, Nan in her ignorance thought the sum he paid her enormous. But she learned too late that she had received about one-half what the stuff was worth. Her fury blazed up in an outburst to seventeen-year-old Betty.

"The old *miser!*" she stormed. "He *knew* we were poor and alone and young and he took advantage of it! He could afford to pay what they were worth. I hate him! I hate them all! Men! Don't talk to me! They're after me all the time to pay this and that and the other ——"

Four more years found Nan twenty-two, facing with a scornful calm the fact that the mortgage was to be foreclosed. The kind gentleman who had so obligingly made the loan had steadily amassed money until he had reached the state where he objected to sitting on his own broad verandah and seeing the shabby little white house under his nose. It was to be removed and a pond with water-lilies and ducks put there instead. He knew they couldn't pay. Nan knew he knew it. Her dislike of men

and their methods was now a hot hatred coated with cold, contemptuous distrust.

However, on looking over the situation, Nan finally decided it was not as bad as it might be. Betty was to be married in a month and would take David to live with her until he finished school. (Nan unwillingly liked Harold Cort—Betty's fiancé. But it was, she argued, because he was still a boy and not a man. She liked boys, especially if they were brothers and of course Harold would be, in a minute.) The twins had found work in a neighboring town and were starting out "on their own," athrill and unafraid. Ben had been in business a year and was rolling in wealth with twenty-five dollars coming to him every Saturday. Really, everyone was well taken care of except Nan and she could take care of herself.

Nan had studied stenography and typewriting at school. Armed with this knowledge and a letter of introduction from a neighbor at home, she had entered the dingy office of Dorf and Zuckermann's as a sunbeam enters a dusty attic and her career as a business woman had begun. Begun and ended in twelve months and now at last she was on the edge of her dream.

The thought was tingling, ecstatic. Nan, sitting on the edge of her bed, Thursday evening, with a

thick braid of pale gold hair over her white shoulders, and her gray eyes wide with a wondering, blazing excitement, did not look at all like a rabid man-hater. But rather she seemed like a little girl seeing fairies for the first time. Perhaps she was, who knows? Certainly it was not Nan's imagination brightening her prospects this time. Was it the work of the wee folk themselves?

Nan rose from her bed and sat down at the little table-desk where her father's picture stood. In her hand was an envelope and from it she pulled a letter.

"Daddy-dearest, listen to this," she said softly.

"DEAR MISS CARTER:

"Your answer to my advertisement in the Evening Sun is at hand. If you can arrange to see me in my office at two o'clock Friday I shall be glad of an opportunity to discuss the matter in detail.

"Yours very truly,

"BRUCE WILSON."

Nan laid down the letter and folded her hands, looking straight at the living likeness in the frame before her.

"Well?" she asked quietly. "Is it or isn't it a dream worth having?"

For a long still minute she sat, then because Nan had a believing heart, and anyone possessing a be-

lieving heart possesses also seeing eyes and hearing ears, she fancied she heard somewhere in the outer darkness the soft tinkle of fairy laughter.

She smiled at the picture of Daddy-dearest and Daddy-dearest smiled back at her.

CHAPTER III

It was exactly five minutes of two. Nan stood before the outer door of the offices of "The Perfection Silk Company," her hand on the knob. A faintly ironical smile twisted her lips for a moment, as her eyes fell on the name in the corner of the glass, "President—Bruce Wilson." For in all the various situations she had conjured, in which she might be the possessor of two children and a home, she had never once fancied herself employed by a man,—a widower,—for that is what she supposed he must be. Always she had imagined a beautiful society woman, selfishly unwilling to give mother-service, engaging her—Nan—to do that part. It was slightly amusing when she recalled her general antipathy toward the man-tribe.

The office she entered was a surprise to her, its cleanliness and order and quiet a marked contrast to the place where she had worked for twelve months. Waiting in a comfortable chair, close to an electric fan, Nan reflected that if she had been fortunate enough to start here, or in a similar place, she would have found a greater liking for the business world.

"Mr. Wilson is free now, Miss Carter."

Nan rose. The trembling excitement that had

possessed her suddenly disappeared now that the moment was at hand. Except for a deeper flush on her cheeks and starriness of her eyes, she was, to all appearances, cool and self-possessed.

With a little nod and smile of thanks to the boy who held open the door for her, she passed through into Bruce Wilson's private office.

She had not known exactly what sort of man she was expecting to see, but certainly it was anything but this grave-faced, brown-eyed man who stood so courteously offering her a chair. If he was a widower there was no mark of sorrow or age upon him. His brown hair waved crisply back in a distinctly young and attractive way and he was as slimly erect as any six foot American ought to be. His face was lean and serious but not sad.

"Miss Carter?"

Nan bent her head and took the chair close to the desk where she faced the man who held her future hopes in his two hands. Strong hands they were, Nan noticed with that peculiar attention to unimportant details that comes in moments of tension. Lean and long hands, well kept, and moving with a slow deliberation to pick up Nan's letter. Then they were still, as still as the rest of him.

This stillness of his was distinctive. Nan became increasingly conscious of it as the interview pro-

ceeded. It held beside dignity and control, a quality of openness, of readiness to listen and willingness to understand. At the same time it held something quite baffling, something that seemed to offset his apparent open-mindedness. There was in his attitude, in his eyes, perhaps, a faint suspicion, a reservation of opinion as to Nan's sincerity. She was only vaguely conscious of this at first, in her own eagerness to make a good impression, herself only half aware of the impression he was making on her.

"The coincidence of our two advertisements appearing together was quite striking. But your letter told me nothing. I shall want to ask a good many questions. You have had experience with children?"

"Oh yes."

Quite simply and briefly Nan told him the bare facts of her life,—of her father's failure—causing the change in their mode of living, of her young years spent in caring for her brothers and Betty. She kept it a clear recital, void of any emotion, but her eyes, flashing and widening and mirroring her memories as she talked, made greater revelations than she realized.

"I should think you would have had enough of baby-tending."

"I should too," she answered surprisingly. "But

when you decide to pick a business for life, you usually pick one you love, and if you really love it you don't get tired of it,—not in the heart of you."

"But the rest of you would get tired so that you would want every Thursday and Sunday off." It was a suggestion as much as a question. Nan looked up in surprise.

"Oh, but no, Mr. Wilson. You don't understand. Or perhaps I don't. I didn't think you wanted a—just a nurse-girl."

"It was difficult for me to say in that brief advertisement just what I am wanting and expecting of the person whom I engage. There will be of course no actual physical labor connected with the position. You will have nothing whatever to do with the meals. Miss Burton, my housekeeper, and the cook attend to that. There will be no sewing, although I shall leave the purchasing of the children's clothes entirely to you. You would not, in any sense, be a nurse-maid, but you would be—I want you to be so far as it is possible—a mother to my two children. I want you to give them the love and understanding and patience that you would give to your own."

"That's exactly what I want to do," Nan said simply.

Bruce picked up an ivory paper cutter and held

it quietly in one hand. Apparently he was waiting for Nan to say more.

"And you see I know that when children are as young as two and four, mothers don't get any time off. Not much." Nan smiling shook her head. "Not easily."

"Don't you expect any, Miss Carter?"

"I don't expect it, no."

Bruce's grave look flashed forth for a second that suspicion that had lain under the surface. Nan met it with an even regard, although her heart hammered heavily. He was, for some unaccountable reason, not believing in her, not trusting her. She must make him. She would make him. She must not start handicapped.

"You may want more time than you anticipate, Miss Carter," Wilson spoke slowly, "time to recuperate from your battles. I feel that it is only fair to warn you that my boy is difficult. He is headstrong, unloving and unlovable. I needn't tell you in detail the many ways he will try your patience, but you may believe me when I say that Bob is a problem no one has been able to solve. He resents correction, fights discipline and is at present quite ungovernable."

He passed his hand a little wearily across his forehead.

"Oh! I'm sorry." Nan leaned forward impulsively, one hand resting on the desk. "I'm sorry because I *know*. David was just that kind of a boy." She hesitated. "Don't you think, Mr. Wilson, Bobby may just need to be loved?"

"Possibly you are right," he agreed. "But he doesn't allow people to love him. I feel—and this is something about which I am most positive, Miss Carter,—I feel that great harm was done Bobby's nature when he was two. We had a woman then who disciplined him by whippings. I didn't find it out for several months and then I discovered my boy's spirit instead of being broken was more rebellious and resentful than ever."

Again Nan nodded.

"She was wrong. Whippings are necessary sometimes, but not all the time."

"Not any of the time, Miss Carter." His tone was suddenly sharp. "That must be distinctly understood between us. Since then I have never permitted anyone to raise a hand against Bob. Incalculable harm was done him at that time, I feel sure and ——" he paused, the paper cutter bent in his fingers, "it is simply not to be discussed. If you feel that you can't manage without corporal punishment there is no use in our proceeding further."

Nan thought rapidly. She had had enough experience to realize that a severe whipping sometimes brought results when nothing else would. Her instinct was all for gentleness, patience, diplomatic coaxing of stubborn little personalities, but she had found with her youngest brother David, that a small whip was the only argument, occasionally. From what Mr. Wilson had told her, Bob and David were kindred spirits. Nan doubted her ability to govern a self-willed, spoiled boy who had defied authority for two years, without resort to the old-fashioned spanking. But a swift look at Wilson's set mouth convinced her that he meant what he said. Under his courteous gentleness was evidently an iron determination. No matter how favorably she might have impressed him up to this moment, he would not consider her longer unless she yielded to him on this point.

"I'm sorry we must differ at once, Mr. Wilson," she said slowly. "Theoretically I agree with you, that whippings are cruel and stupid measures to take to gain obedience or authority, but practically I have found them necessary upon occasions. However, you have, of course, the final decision in this matter and—I shall abide by it."

Bruce acknowledged this with a slight inclination of his head. Then briskly—

"Now as to salary, it is of course difficult to put a price on such service as this that I want. If it is worth anything—it is priceless, but I had in mind ——"

He named a figure that sounded royal to the little stenographer of Dorf and Zuckermann's.

"Is that satisfactory?"

Nan's laugh rang out.

"Oh, that's *too* funny! Why, do you know how it sounds to me? It sounds just as though you were a prince in a fairy tale and I were the beggar maid. I don't believe it,—not really—but I'm going to, because the fun of fairy tales lies in believing them."

"And the fun of dreams lies in dreaming them."

"That's fun, of course. But how wonderful when dreams really come true."

"It's been my experience that dreams are soap bubbles. They vanish at the first real touch."

"Oh no!" Nan put out her hands as though to push back the idea. "You mustn't be like that. You must always, always believe. Why! Never in all my life have I had a dream come true, but I've kept on believing in them. Mr. Wilson, I have to. I have to—or I'd die. I'd want to, I mean."

He smiled at her ingenuous eagerness. Nan felt it holding some pity for her probable future dis-

illusionment, some slight contempt for her youth. She bit her lip holding back the thought that crowded for utterance. Didn't she know, too, how easy it was to be cynical? But she wouldn't be. She sat silent, her eyes downcast, a flush staining her cheeks, wishing with all her might that her little girl rush of words had been withheld.

"I am very glad to have had this interview, Miss Carter," Mr. Wilson terminated the interview. "I wanted to meet you, for your letter promised personality as so few did. I have not been disappointed. However, there have been, of course, other applicants to whom I must give fair consideration; so if there is nothing else you wish to ask I can promise to let you know within three or four days how I decide about this."

Nan rose. Things were getting dark and noisy inside her. "In three or four days ——" Why, to-morrow her week would be up and she couldn't beg to stay longer at the boarding house with the outcome of this venture still vague. She had been so sure, so foolishly sure that her dream was too close now to be whisked away.

Bruce was surprised at the sudden whiteness of her face, the startling blackness of her eyes. She sent him a brave little smile, murmured a "Very well, thank you," and turned to go.

At the door his voice halted her.

"I can, I suppose, reach you at this address any time?"

"Until to-morrow, Mr. Wilson."

Nan turned back again quietly, her small head lifted proudly, her mouth set in determination against rising tears.

"Oh, and after that?"

"I—really don't know."

It seemed to Nan that they faced each other for an eternity. She was unaware of the appeal her slightness and whiteness and bravery were making. She was fighting too hard to hold to the last shreds of her courage to be conscious of anything, so that his next words coming from a long and wavering distance were a surprise.

"I don't want to lose track of you," he said at last. "So I think—suppose we try it? For—say a month. You may want to leave before the end of that time, you know. My children aren't angels."

In the sudden relief Nan was speechless. Color flooded her face and tears were close to the surface. She kept her eyes down until she had winked them back, then she lifted her face ashine with gratitude and happiness.

"Thank you," she said simply. "You've no idea how much this means to me."

In the brown eyes meeting hers across the width of the room Nan was startled to meet such a look of pain as she had not seen since she had stood before her beloved father in the days of his disaster. It was a devastated look—a look as of something precious lost forever. She was dumb before it and aghast at her discovery. Silently she turned to go.

"Just a moment, Miss Carter."

Nan turned back to face a grave, self-contained man. If it was agreeable to her, he would like to advance a month's salary and they would thus both be sure the matter was definitely settled. While he made out the check Nan's belief in the Good Luck Fairies crystallized. This would pay her board bill and still leave her something for new clothes.

"You will be ready when the limousine calls for you at five?"

Nan nodded.

"Yes, surely."

"That's all."

Bewilderment and joy, tears and the laughter of relief were battling for supremacy as Nan slipped through the door and away. But joy finally won first place. She was to have the position. The Good Luck Fairies were backing her.

CHAPTER IV

NAN had less than two hours for shopping but she made every moment count. And while she flew in an ecstasy of excitement from the purchasing of dresses to the buying of white pumps, her mind was busy trying to fathom the reason for the look she had surprised in Bruce Wilson's eyes. It haunted her, it had come so without warning. Recollecting her interview bit by bit, she could find nothing immediately preceding her departure that might have brought up memories of so disturbing a nature.

What was it?

She finally decided she was over-imaginative, strung up to exaggeration because of her own emotions. The reason was, of course, due to his anxiety over Bobby-boy. What man with a difficult child no one could manage, and himself without time to learn, wouldn't have a queer, desperate look sometimes?

Nan was sorry for him and following that came stealing like a blessing over her the belief that she was needed in this household to which she was going. It gave her as true and great a happiness as the realization that she was at last to begin to live her dream, for there's nothing so heart warming

to lonely souls as being needed—except being wanted.

"And pretty soon they'll want me!" Nan bobbed her head decisively as she swung through the last shop door. "Bobby and Shirley, I mean."

The business of packing was a hastily managed affair, interrupted and accompanied by exclamatory farewells from all those inmates of the boarding house who were home. But at last it was accomplished and Nan left her room, stripped of its dear familiarity, without a backward glance.

"I'm glad I'm alone," she thought as she sank into the cushioned limousine. She was tired and as soon as the city had been left behind the big bridge she took off her hat and closed her eyes. This was life at last. She sniffed, then opened her eyes and smiled in contentment at the roses in the vase beside her.

"I feel as though I were just beginning to live, as though ——" she wrinkled her forehead, "how queer! As though I were on the edge of something,—as though I'd been marking time up to now, holding my breath waiting for this moment. Oh! How silly I am!"

She laughed at herself, shrugged and settled back to enjoyment of the long drive.

As the car swept into the gravelled driveway

Nan felt a thrill of wonder. It was all so exactly as she had pictured it. There was a stretch of lawn lying golden green in the late sunlight with a few glowing Japanese maples breaking the emerald. There were splendid trees stretching their full length on the grass in cool black shadow. There was a cluster of graceful birches spraying their dainty network of leaves against the house.

The house itself was a big rambling stone affair, its deep-set windows and wide doorway seeming to offer hospitality to all strangers.

"It almost speaks," Nan thought, moving with a little half-smile across the broad verandah.

Behind the butler, coming rapidly down the wide stairs to greet Nan, was Miss Burton, the housekeeper. She was a fussy little woman of trailing ends. Her hair, her shawl, her words were always in the air. She was full of a busy kindness, a gentle fluttering concern over everyone's comfort.

"This is Miss Carter, isn't it? Of course—I thought so, though you can't always be sure—about anything. Will you —— What will you do? Perhaps you're tired, and would like to go to your rooms first—or would you ——"

"Rooms!" The luxury of it! A suite perhaps. Nan nodded, thinking how in keeping the vague

fly-away speech was with the rest of Miss Burton, and how glad she was that the pattering, hesitant conversation permitted her to follow in silence. It gave her time for a swift approving glance around her. It was all there, just as she wanted it, vistas of big rooms, thick velvet rugs, polished surfaces, harmonious colors, golden gleams from a brass bowl or a mirror frame as sunlight slanted through a window.

At the end of a long corridor, on the second floor, Miss Burton paused.

"The nursery is here, next to your living-room. In that way, you see, the two connect—and you can always keep in touch —— Shall we stop here first or go on to your own?"

"The children are out?"

"Yes—I believe—that is, I'm quite sure —— Yes—they aren't in the nursery."

"Then let's wait."

"You will be happy here, I think." Miss Burton opened a door into a room done in wicker and blue and tan chintz. A corner fireplace, filled book-cases and a perfectly appointed tea-wagon promised comfort on cold days. Next to this room was Nan's dainty white bedroom and the tiled bathroom of her imagination. But what drew Nan like a magnet was a screened-in porch, opening off both

her rooms and overlooking the garden and blue water beyond.

"What's that?" Nan pointed to the stretch of sea.

"That's the Sound, you know. Such a pretty view, don't you think so? You will enjoy it, I'm sure—at least I hope so."

Nan stood silent, feasting her eyes. Suddenly she turned and flung her coat on the table stretching her arms wide and high.

"Enjoy it? Oh, I shall love it, I know."

Miss Burton picked up Nan's coat, folding it carefully and patting out wrinkles.

"You will find—difficulties, no doubt. Nothing is very easy, you know—earning your living, I mean —— No matter how you choose to do it there are always people ——"

"All sorts and kinds," Nan agreed, "but isn't life just learning to get on with them?"

"Of course—that's just it. Just what I was trying to say. But sometimes it's so hard, when you don't understand."

"Mr. Wilson told me about Bobby, Miss Burton."

"Yes—of course—I supposed he would. Bobby is—well, you probably know. And what you don't you'll find out. It wasn't of him I was thinking.

Mr. Wilson himself is—well,—he's had troubles, and that accounts—you must excuse him, my dear, if he—I'm very fond of him myself," Miss Burton ended her struggle finally, laying down the much-folded coat at the same time.

"You have been here quite a while, Miss Burton?"

"Oh, my yes," she began shoving the magazines an inch or two. "For years. I was here through it all—his wife's death, I mean—so that's how I know. I am a—a sort of distant relative—very distant——" she added this apologetically as though she had no right to belong. "At first I just lived here because—well, there didn't seem to be any other place—but now of course I am housekeeper and—Mr. Wilson is a very good man."

His goodness seemed to stir little Miss Burton to her depths for she fumbled about for her handkerchief. Nan broke an awkward little silence.

"Who is with the children now, Miss Burton?"

"Agnes." Miss Burton caught at her shawl. "Agnes is the up-stairs maid—such a homely creature—I'm really very sorry. But a thoroughly good servant and very good with the children. She seems to know how to avoid battles with Bob—she's not very positive herself—that may be the reason. And of course it's easy to get on with Shirley."

"I haven't heard much about her."

"A little sunbeam, Miss Carter, a real little sunbeam, so bright and—cunning. You'll love her and she'll give you no trouble, I'm sure. She's always sweet—always."

"Does Bobby love her?" Nan asked suddenly. They were sitting together in the swing, Nan's hands clasping a crossed knee, Miss Burton's tucking in wisps of hair, catching at her slipping shawl and tugging down her skirt.

"Why—I don't know—I never thought. I suppose so. We never know, you see, what Bobby likes, but we always know what he doesn't like."

"Miss Burton," Nan's mind jumped to another subject, "is there anything troubling Mr. Wilson? I saw such a queer look in his face to-day. Is it worry about the children?"

Miss Burton drew her shawl about her, lifted her hands to tuck in flying locks and clutched at the slipping shawl again.

"He is,—no, I wouldn't say he's in trouble, exactly. I think he's *out* of it, myself. But he's a splendid man—splendid—and too much alone. He's dreadfully alone. Nobody ever comes to the house except a few business friends and he seldom goes away. It's all wrong. He's too young for such exclusion. I wish"—she hesitated, pulled at

her skirt, then finished the thought with a little gasp —"I do so wish someone could take him out of himself."

"Is he still grieving over his wife's death, do you think?"

"Yes—no—I suppose that might be it, in a way." Miss Burton clutched at a fact and landed it firmly before Nan. "She was very beautiful, a most beautiful woman."

Running feet and voices in the hall interrupted them.

"The children, Miss Carter. Shall Agnes bring them in here? Or will you ——"

Nan jumped to her feet in a sudden panic of excitement.

"Oh! I wanted to change my dress! Children love pretty things so, and I have a darling new one. Tell Agnes to take them into the nursery as usual and don't let them know I am here. I'll come in a minute. That's the door, isn't it? Thank you."

Miss Burton nodded and went out while Nan flew to her suitcase and with trembling fingers pulled out the straps. A brisk washing and rubbing, dexterous flinging up of her golden hair into a coil at the nape of her neck, swift slipping into white silk stockings and pumps and the new pale green organdy frock and Nan stood ready. The hurry

and excitement had splashed her cheeks with crimson. Her gray eyes had caught a reflection of her dress and shone like pools of water, beneath her black brows. The short hair, damp about her face, cuddled in tiny curls at her ears. Nan nodded in approval at the slim flowery appeal of her and then promptly forgot it. She thought about her looks only long enough to satisfy herself that they would do what she wanted. She herself liked the contrast of her dark-fringed eyes with her golden hair but she was quite unaware of the appealing strangeness of it. Now with her mind intent on the children she slipped quickly to the nursery door, and heart beating hard, she stood a moment, listening to the prattle of Shirley's baby voice, then she opened it quietly and went in.

CHAPTER V

NAN stood silent in the doorway undiscovered. In the middle of the big white sunlit room Bob rode a hobby horse silently, his square, straight back sturdily erect, his black hair brushed into a stiff pompadour, big-boy fashion, his profile sullen and uncompromising. Shirley, a winsome lass with red-gold locks, was on her knees on the floor before the wide red-bricked fireplace, busy hands skillfully piling up blocks in a "bid high tower," her small lissome body quivering in excitement as it wobbled and fell with a crash among the blocks and dolls and tracks that strewed the floor.

"Oh my! my! my!" she cried with undiminishing emphasis, jumping up and whirling about on her toes, but coming to an abrupt standstill as she saw the strange person in the doorway.

"Hello!" Nan said instantly, advancing toward the wee mite who stood poised like a fairy, her sunny hair clinging in curls about her eager face, her brown eyes wide with surprise. Shirley measured Nan a half-second gravely, then her friendliness and fearlessness asserted themselves.

"Hayoo!" she replied in her high sweet voice awaiting Nan's next move.

"Do you know how to build a bridge?" Nan asked, sitting on the floor by the blocks and ignoring Bob who had swung about on his high hobby horse to face the intruder with a scowl.

"Bid a bidge," Shirley repeated ecstatically.

"I'll show you." Nan began picking up the blocks and explaining each move. Shirley wriggled with impatient delight during the performance; Bob watched silent and immobile from his horse.

"And now, it's all done and we can make a train run right under it. Got a train, Bob?" she asked casually, without looking up.

Bob looked down at this new person in doubt. So many new persons had come and gone. Bob always accepted them indifferently, ignored them until the moment came for asserting himself, then made himself felt with a power that usually brought quick results to him or to the person. But this new person was somehow different. She was nice to look at for one thing, all sort of green and gold like outdoors, and she didn't begin with kisses or orders. She didn't seem to begin at all. It was as though she kept on from a beginning way back further than Bobby could remember. Anyhow he could find her a train if she wanted it, and the bridge *was* good.

He climbed down and made his offering in silence.

"Goody!" Nan cried, flashing a smile into the brown depths of the eyes so deliberately studying her. He was the image of his father, she thought, a little darker in coloring but with the same crisply waving hair, serious air and square resolute chin. "Now, how do you make it go? Does it wind up?"

The business of running the train under the bridge was so absorbing that Agnes's entrance was unnoticed by the children. Nan, looking up, sent a nod and friendly smile to the maid, thankful for the warning Miss Burton had given her. Never had she seen so homely a woman. But glowing through the ugly surface was a complete and serene selflessness; back of the wide, toothy smile was gentleness; shining out of small crossed eyes was an intense adoration for these children—all children. Agnes loved them with a beautiful love that asked nothing, that gave all, that was endlessly patient and sweet and unobtrusive. Nan understood why it was that Agnes filled in the gaps between the arrivals and departures of the "pseudo-mothers."

"She's just made up of the odds and ends of things," Nan thought. "How do you do, Agnes?"

she said aloud. "What time do the children have supper?"

"It's coming up now in a few minutes, Miss Carter, on the dumb waiter."

"Oh! Then do let's have a game of hide and seek until it gets here. Bobby and I, and you and Shirley. We'll hide our eyes and count. Now hurry!"

"Huwwy!" echoed Shirley as she danced off to hide with Agnes in Nan's room.

"It's a hundred," Bobby's deep, husky voice spoke for the first time. "I know where they are."

"You didn't peek, did you?" Nan was on her knees on the floor, her gray eyes looking levelly into his brown ones.

"Course not." Scorn in a flashing glance. "I know, 'cause they always hide there. Behind the swing on your porch."

Nan's and Bobby's turn to hide! Nan slipped a hand into the boy's and whispered:

"You must know places better than I do. Take me!"

Bobby nodded and they were off. Down the corridor they flew to a portière hanging across a closed door. Small hands pushed Nan in, then the two stood breathing hard, pressed flat against the door.

"I thought of this when you were counting."

"It's dandy, Bob."

Silence.

"I like this game."

"So do I."

Silence again.

"I like to be called Bob better than Bobby."

"It's more grown-up," Nan agreed understandingly.

More silence.

"What's your name?"

"Nan."

"Not Miss anything?"

"No, just Nan. Just as though I were a big sister, Bob."

Footsteps down the hall.

"Shall we 'boo' at them? Or let 'em find us?" Bob whispered.

"What do you think?"

"It's fun to boo. Shirley squeals so."

"All right. Wait till I squeeze your hand, then we'll both boo and jump."

Bated breaths. Footsteps padding closer. Nan smiled in the dark at the tense little figure with indrawn breath saved for the tremendous boo!

"Now!"

And they burst out upon Mr. Wilson walking rapidly toward the nursery.

Bobby was more aghast than Nan. This father-man was nice. Bobby liked to lean against him and sniff the smoky odor that clung to his clothes, but he was a bit frightening. He didn't say much, this father-man, and he didn't do much, but if he ever did anything it was as though lightning had struck you. There was Miss Harris who whipped him. Father had just shot out his arm and Miss Harris had turned white and left the room and never came back. Evidently Nan didn't know what a frightening man Father could be, for she was laughing up at him, and at Shirley dancing down the hall and at Agnes who was crying—"No fair. Out in the hall! No fair!"

When they were all in the nursery again, the dumb waiter was there and Agnes swiftly set a small table. Nan, busily tying on bibs, pouring out milk and sprinkling sugar, was only half aware of Mr. Wilson's sinking into the great wing-chair close to the fireplace.

"Now here's your spoon, Shirley-girly. You can feed yourself, can't you?"

Before the words were out of her mouth Shirley had flung the spoon across the room, and stiff with anger in her chair, shrieked:

"*Feed* Tirley! *Feed* Tirley!"

Nan looked startled for a second. Agnes tried to convey a helpless and wordless sympathy. She had meant to warn Miss Carter of this one naughty trick of the little girl's. Now it was too late, and Miss Carter's first night too, and Mr. Wilson watching like a hawk in the chair ——

"Can't she feed herself yet?" Nan asked the maid.

"She can, Miss, but she won't."

Nan rose quickly from her knees beside Shirley, picked up the spoon and brought it back smiling.

"See, Shirley," she said. "Nan will put this beautiful big ring on Shirley's little thumb. Won't that be fine? But you see it's so big, it won't stay on unless you hold the spoon too. There! Now take a bite and see how that big yellow stone sparkles at you."

"'arkle at 'oo," Shirley gurgled, delighted at the new word and the new toy, and happily unconscious of the trick played on her.

"Now hold your spoon tight," Nan cautioned, "or the ring will fall off."

Supper proceeded and was finished in grave contemplative silence on the part of Bob, in squeals of delight and constant chatter on the part of Shirley.

Nan was kept busy answering the insistent little mite who was exercising her vocabulary to its limit. In the intensity of her effort to understand the child, she utterly forgot Bruce Wilson, sunk in the shadow of the big chair, his grave eyes on the group at the wee table.

"Now," Nan untied bibs and wiped Shirley's mouth, "what usually happens next, Bob?"

"Washed and put to bed," briefly.

"Who puts the toys to bed?" Nan surveyed the cluttered room questioningly.

"Agnes." Bob moved indifferently toward the window.

"But they aren't Agnes's toys. Why should she?" Nan queried pleasantly. "Supposing Shirley puts her dolls and blocks to bed on the window-seat over there; and supposing Bob puts his tracks and balls in this closet,—it's meant for just that, I see; and supposing Agnes and I move the big things back against the wall." She began her part of the work as she talked. "That would be fairer, I think, don't you, Bob, honestly?"

Bob studied Nan's face, puzzled. Was she *making* him be nice and neat?

"I don't want to," he finally settled it, taking no chances, his mouth sullen, his feet stubbornly apart.

"Very well," Nan agreed cheerfully. "I hope I

don't stumble on them in the dark, though, and bend 'em all out of shape. Thank you, Shirley. That's a big help. Thanks, Agnes. I think we won't need you any more to-night. Now, Shirley, if you'll come out on my cool porch, I'll tell you the story about Peter Rabbit's going to sea. Peter Rabbit, you know, lived in a sand bank——"

Nan was moving through the doorway, Shirley dancing behind her. Bob followed slowly. Stories had never been on the programme before.

"Sorry, Bob," Nan smiled back at the hesitant figure, "the story is just for Shirley. To-morrow night, if you want to help put the toys to bed you can hear one too."

At this Bobby threw himself flat on the floor and began beating his feet and shrieking at the top of his lungs. Nan gave him a backward glance, then went out into her room, shut the door and told Shirley the story on her porch.

It was difficult business. Her mind was on the enraged boy whose screams penetrated through the partition. What should she do? How long ought she let him howl like that? How could she stop him anyway? Had Bruce Wilson gone? Mercy, he was working himself into a frenzy. She must do something. She finished her story hurriedly and with Shirley's hand in hers went back into the

nursery. At the door she met Bruce coming for her.

"There's been enough of this, Miss Carter."

Nan looked past him to the convulsed figure on the floor.

"Do you forbid anything except whippings?"

"No."

Dropping Shirley's hand Nan went swiftly into the bathroom and returned with a cup of water. She stood over Bob and between his shrieks made herself heard.

"Get up, Bob."

Bobby ceased his writhing long enough to eye the cup curiously. Then his yells burst forth afresh.

Without another word Nan dashed the cup of water on the boy's face. Spluttering he rose and Nan seized him in her strong young arms.

"That'll be all," she said quietly. "You're too big for this nonsense."

For a second they eyed each other, then Bob, with a sudden wrench, flung himself from Nan, picked up the cup and hurled it across the room. It fell on the hearthstone and broke into splinters. Bob commenced his screaming again.

Nan suddenly felt her helplessness. She had hoped such an occurrence as this might be avoided until she had a hold on the boy's heart, or at least

until she had grown to know him better. But now it was working in the dark to guess what to do. She bit her lip, then turned to the wide-eyed Shirley.

"Come here, dear, Nan will undress you."

Agnes came to the door to say that Bruce was wanted on the telephone. Nan sighed with relief, then beckoned Agnes to her.

"What does make him stop finally?" she asked. "What have you had to do before?"

"Give him his way, Miss. It's the only thing. He wants the story you wouldn't tell him."

Nan pressed her lips together and finished the undressing in silence. Agnes swept up the broken pieces of cup and left the room. Bobby screamed on. He was evidently equal to such noise as this for an unlimited length of time. His energy was unabated. Various tactics Nan tried after Shirley was tucked in her wee white bed were of no avail. She stood with tears of anger and mortification in her eyes, as Bruce reëntered the room.

He gave a swift look at the red face and wild eyes of the child.

"This has got to stop, Miss Carter. He'll be ill. What are you going to do?"

Nan picked up the boy.

"Bobby. Bobby-darling. Hush now, so Nan can tell you the story."

Bobby subsided instantly. With his head on her shoulder as she sat in the low rocker, Nan began the Peter Rabbit tale for the second time. Her voice low and sweet soothed Bob whose sobs lessened gradually. Nan kept her eyes down, struggling to hide the shame she felt at her failure. Bruce left before she finished.

Nan followed up the story with a quiet talk after Bobby lay in bed. He listened in stolid silence, apparently indifferent and unimpressed. Nan laid her lips to the dark head and went into her room.

Failure. Flat and complete. She felt almost ill from her struggle. She walked up and down her little porch, clasping and unclasping her hands. She could not go on giving Bob his way. But how was she to battle with him? Would loving him do it? Would he, finally after weeks of patience and tolerance and quiet explanation such as she had given him to-night, would he finally change his ways? In her heart Nan believed not. She was sure that the only way to succeed with Bob was to bend his will to hers once, through force, after that love and lots of it.

But how exert force when that was just what was forbidden? Nan sighed and gave it up. She stood still resting her head against a pillar, her eyes on the darkening stretch of water before her.

Slowly peace and quiet came back to her, and with them a little reassurance. She could at least try. One disappointment need not mean ultimate failure. She had a month before her and somehow, someway she would reach Bobby.

There came a soft rap at her door. Dinner was served; was Miss Carter ready now?

Nan, in her pale green dress with its crisp ruffles of white at the neck and elbows, and a perky wide white sash that tied in a big bow, floated behind her like a large butterfly, moved quickly through the hall to the stairs.

How still the house was! A faint little chill crept into her heart dulling the first fresh enthusiasm she had felt for the loveliness here. She paused at the wide doorway of a big room and looked in. Silence, emptiness, exquisite perfection. There was no denying the beauty of Chinese rugs, of the richly carved woodwork that panelled the walls, of the choice paintings and hangings and lamps; but it lacked warmth, personal touches, the clutter of possessions to which she was so accustomed. She could not like seeing highly polished tables bare of books and magazines, chairs looking as though no person had ever "sat them soft," round sofa pillows whose shapes were never dented by warm young heads or vigorous fists, mantels

without vases,—gifts out of taste, perhaps, but expressing a certain cordiality and friendliness.

She moved across the hall to another room, apparently the music room. It, too, was very big, very still and very polished. Nan suddenly felt small and lonely. Why, it was no home at all. It was just a house! It was like a—like—a beautiful dead face, she thought. Her mind raced back eagerly to the cosy nursery where baby shoes lay awry on the floor, baby socks sprawled on a chair, and little clothes fluttered in the soft night breeze. That room and hers—were lived in. But this, somehow, was just to look at.

Nan's mind raced back up-stairs and grew warm while her body followed the butler to the dining-room and grew cold. She seated herself in the great carved chair at one end of the long oblong table set for one and childishly swung her feet. Then in horrified amazement at herself she stopped them and curled them about the legs of the chair. Mercy! That was no better. Her skirts were so short the butler couldn't help but see the tipped white heels as he passed behind her. What *did* one do with too-short legs? Just let them hang and go to sleep? Well, hang then. But this was her last meal in this awful dining-room, that was one thing certain. She couldn't stand the sombre

brownness, its queer lights glowing from under or behind figures that were set up on a rail above the panels. She supposed everything here was perfect in its Italian detail. She grudgingly admitted the beauty of the tan rug with its dull blue border, of the chairs so solid and simple in line, with their upholstered blue seats, of the rare silver service that stood on—one wouldn't call it a buffet, but it served that purpose.

"Has Miss Burton eaten—dined—yet?" Her voice sounded small and timid in the silence.

"Yes, Madam. She eats in her room."

Nan's cold hands clutched under her napkin. It was this automaton that was spoiling things. Was it proper or wasn't it to talk to him? It probably wasn't, but he was human and she was human and she bet a cooky he'd like it as well as she would. Anyway one leg was sound asleep and she *had* to move.

He stood beside her, bending deferentially. Nan looked up suddenly.

"Perkins, this dull light is making me awfully lonesome. Can't you find some candles somewhere and put them on the table?"

"Candles, ma'am? Yes, ma'am, certainly."

Perkins disappeared. Nan heaved a sigh and plumped both elbows on the table.

"He's as bad as the sofa pillows. Never a dent. Wonder if I'll have time to run around the table and get the feel in my legs again?"

Nan caught her breath, slid cautiously down out of her chair, harked a moment, then limping, began a promenade about the room. Around and around she went, faster and faster, with the limp going as her leg awoke. Suddenly she halted face to face with the silent-footed Perkins.

"Oh!" Nan gasped. "How did you get here? I mean, thank you, Perkins, that's very nice. Put them right on the table and light them all. Isn't that better?"

"Yes, ma'am, it is."

Nan, back in her chair with two legs awake, brightened by the cheerful glow of six white candles, was herself again.

"Perkins, doesn't Mr. Wilson ever eat?"

"Yes, ma'am, but always in his den, Madam. He——" Perkins became confidential at last. Nan leaned to the lowered tones, not for gossip's sake, but for the pure human friendliness of it. "He hasn't had a meal in this room since Mrs. Wilson died, Madam."

"Oh!"

Perkins beside Nan, bending over a silver platter, lifted its cover.

"No, thank you, Perkins, not any more. Not any more of anything. It was a wonderful dinner, but I'm not used to such big ones and I'm crowded now. Will you please show me where Mr. Wilson's den is?"

Slim and girlish in her flowery summer frock, she knocked at the closed door of the den. Her heart was beating hard, pumping a scarlet color up to her cheeks and darkening her bright eyes.

"Come in," Mr. Wilson's quiet, courteous voice and Mr. Wilson quiet and courteous himself ushered Nan into the den. Ah! This was a room! This was his home, not the rest of the great house. Its deep leather chairs, shaded lights, low tables, spelled comfort and taste but they spelled the owner too. There were flowers here, open books and magazines, a cigar stand, with its tray half filled, a pale ring of smoke still in the air. The windows were wide to the dark night and a fragrance from the garden drifted in. Nan's eyes lightened appreciatively.

Bruce indicated a chair.

"You have come to tender your resignation so soon?" he queried smiling.

Nan caught a sharp breath, her chin lifted.

"No." She paused. His easy doubt of her made things difficult for her. But she must say what she

had come to say, must get what help she could. "No, I'm disappointed, but not discouraged. But I wondered if you could give me some advice? Bobby and I are so new to each other. What else could I have done? What way was there to stop him without giving him the story I had taken away in punishment?"

Bruce took a chair opposite Nan, settled back in it and reached for his pipe. "May I?" he asked, and Nan nodded.

"I don't know," he made answer finally. "I hoped you would." He lit his pipe and concluded unhelpfully: "You see, Miss Carter, it is going to be difficult."

"Yes, I see." This wasn't what she had expected. Bruce's attitude was that of one unrelated to the matter. In some hope and more skepticism he was standing apart watching her manœuvres. Was he leaving the situation entirely in her hands? she asked. He agreed that he was. Nan fell into a thoughtful silence.

"Poor little laddie," she said at last softly. "He's having a miserable time, don't you know he is? All at odds with a world that should be beautiful now, if it's ever to be. But there must be some way to get into his heart," she mused.

"You suggested a way this afternoon."

"Loving, you mean. Yes, I know." Nan squared her shoulders ever so slightly. "Well, if loving will do it,—open his nature—I'll pry it open —sometime."

A cloud of smoke went up between them, through it came his words casually:

"Love is supposed to work miracles."

Was there some hidden cynicism here? Nan did not know, but something warm and responsive in her withdrew. That impression of his remoteness, of his amused tolerance for her and her efforts to win Bob, struck upon her again. But he was *not* removed from the struggle. It was his too, in a way—or should be. And under his amusement was deep concern, that she knew. However, he was not going to give her any help. Possibly he was really unable. The best he could do in the way of explicit counsel was to forbid corporal punishment. She must work the thing out herself, in spite of him. She rose rather abruptly.

"I came to ask you if I might—if it would make any difference if I had my meals in my room?"

He rose too, indifferently polite. Nan's explanation became slightly hurried in the breathless little-girl way she sometimes had of talking.

"Your dining-room is lovely and Perkins served me beautifully, and everything is just as it should

be, but—you know I'm not used to big, lonesome places—and—and—not talking to people because it's not proper. So, if I could just have my meals in my room—or better yet!" her slight nervousness left her. "Let me eat with the children. I'd just as soon have cereal and milk as a dinner, truly I would. I was brought up to it anyway."

In the circle of light from a standing lamp, she looked white and tired for all her gay little dress and eager tumbling words. His voice and face softened insensibly.

"Why, certainly, Miss Carter. Have your meals in your room if you prefer. Miss Burton does, and the dining-room is gloomy."

"Thank you."

She started to go.

"What did you think of my little girl?"

"Oh, she's a darling." A quick smile lit Nan's face. "She's a wonderful child, I think, truly. There is a rare sweetness about her, and something unusually vivid too."

He nodded.

"Her little tantrum to-night ——"

"Was funny, wasn't it?"

"You handled it most capably."

Nan was grateful for the praise. It was good to know she had succeeded in a small measure at any

rate in what she had attempted. Here, in this lived-in room with Bruce for the moment sincerely kind, a glow of friendliness flooded her. She spoke impulsively.

"Oh! I am glad to be here. I really was never before quite so glad to be alive."

"I didn't know anyone felt that way these days, what with Freud and the rest of them turning us inside out."

He spoke whimsically enough but Nan felt that his smile masked a belief in his words.

"Oh, but aren't you?" Her amazement was genuine. How could this man not be tingling with the joy of life with all that he had?

He gave a short laugh.

"Life isn't—when you get living it—as pleasant as you have fancied it would be."

"Of course," Nan admitted. "At times. But at those times you have to pretend."

He shook his head.

"I never could see the use in that."

Oh, but there was use, a great deal of use, she contended, turning sharply back to him. Why, if one didn't pretend, the hard times would be unbearable and all those around you would feel your unhappiness, would in turn be saddened by it, and what right did you have to do that?

But pretence was falsity, and that was one thing unendurable to him. He had never known it to bring anything but unhappiness in the end. Besides when you pretended, you were just shutting your eyes to things. Sometime you would have to open them, and the things would still be there, unmoved, unchanged, for all your pretending. What *was* the use?

Smiling he waited her answer. She puzzled for it, laughed, and finally gave it up.

"Maybe sometime I can show you what I mean," she said. "Good-night."

She left him, wondering about him. Miss Burton's unfinished sentences came back to her. He was unhappy. Something had happened in his life, something that had turned him bitter.

She was still thinking of him when she reached her room and with some annoyance she shrugged thoughts of him from her. He was not her problem. Bobby was, and he was promising to be one that would take the best of her time and thought. Bruce would have to solve his own difficulties.

CHAPTER VI

SUMMER did not seem like summer here, in this cool, spacious house where there was always shade when one wanted it, almost always a breeze, always peace and quiet. And with the added luxuries of shower baths, ice cold drinks and exquisitely laundered clothes, summer became not only endurable, but enjoyable.

Nan and the children romped through the days gaily. Nan took especial care to avoid coming to an issue with Bob. She tolerated much rather than arrive at the point of conflict with him until she was sure of a hold on his affections. She discovered that he had a rather ponderous mind, one moving slowly but with a steam-roller weight of precision. He was not to be swerved. He regarded everything;—new food, clothes, people and places,—with a monumental calm from all angles. Then he accepted or rejected them with unmoved finality. Nan wanted him to have accepted her before she took her next stand against him.

Two weeks slipped away, two sunlit weeks in which the days were all much alike. Nan sprang from her bed at six-thirty and in her blue wrapper

and slippers, she went into the nursery where Bob and Shirley were prattling. Stories and dressing proceeded. Then breakfast, superintended by Agnes while Nan dressed, then Nan's own delicious meal served on her sleeping porch, with Shirley and Bob engaging companions. Followed glorious hours out of doors, always a swim at eleven—if the boisterous splashing of the three might be called that—dinner and naps.

While the children were asleep Nan had her lunch in her room or on the balcony again. These two hours she loved, for it was her time for letter writing, for reading, for sewing, for long pondering upon Bobby-boy, smiling reminiscences of Shirley. Sometimes Miss Burton and she lunched together, but more often Nan chose to be alone.

At three there were fresh, clean clothes, much brushing of lovely curls, and tying of flying ribbons, a cup of milk and a cracker apiece—then heigho! for the sunshine and shadows again.

With dusk there came always a little weariness and irritability. Nan rose triumphantly to this trying hour. She had a fund of stories, a low sweet voice for lullabies and a genius for invention of games. Washing and supper over, and warm, tired little bodies buttoned into night clothes, Nan somehow scrunched them both into her small lap and

rocked them a while. But if she failed to give them space enough she never failed to give them love enough and the tenderness of her arms and fresh fragrance of her kisses kept them still.

It was so that Wilson often found them. He had formed the habit of coming to the nursery as soon as he reached home from the office, for it was the only time he had to see the children and to study Nan with them. Nan always gave him a smile of welcome, then went on with her song or her story. He would slip into the shadow of the winged chair and listen, watching with a little pain in his grave eyes that the dusk and Nan's own absorption kept her from discovering. When she had finished, Shirley always scampered to Dad, Bob hung about stiff and silent, and Nan disappeared to her room until he had gone.

If he came earlier at the bib-tying, supper-munching time, Agnes was usually on hand and Nan after a word or two with her would go away sooner. She never came back until she heard him say good-night and the quick shutting of the nursery door behind him.

She had just returned to the children one evening and was sitting on the floor tinkling the wee piano, making a game of putting the toys away. In vigorous rhythmic swing Bob and Shirley with their

animals and toys marched repeatedly to the closet until the last one was tucked away for the night. When the game was over, Nan jumped up to discover Bruce in the doorway.

"Here's Daddy, children."

Shirley obediently gave him the kiss, which Nan had taught her was wanted, but Bob remained in the middle of the floor, indifferent and unresponsive to his father's greeting.

"You can't go away till you've told us the story," he reminded Nan, with a bare glance in his father's direction.

"I'm not going to, Bob."

Nan took the low rocker. Shirley clambered into her lap. Bob dropped on the floor beside her. The little man and the big man in his winged chair, kept silent but Shirley's interruptions were constant. Finally Nan jumped to the end.

"And when Peter Rabbit at last got home, he was so tired and so ashamed his mother just tumbled him into bed without a word! And now, you little wiggle-twister, I'm going to tumble *you* into bed."

"Wiggle-tister," Shirley giggled.

During the business of undressing and washing Bruce was called to the telephone. He reached the nursery door again just as Nan suggested prayers.

Unobserved he stood in the doorway of the hall, looking into the lamplit room.

"I say mine to myself," Bob announced marching to his bed and kneeling in silence. Nan smiled at the independence of the youngster, then held out her arms to Shirley who leaped to her lap and knelt with folded hands and eyes dancing with mirth. It was a new institution, explained that day.

"Shut your eyes."

Shirley squinted obediently.

"Suppose you just say, 'God bless Daddy.'"

"Dod b'ess Daddy," Shirley giggled, peeping through locked fingers. "I see you!"

"You darling."

Nan's lips were hungry. They swept over the baby face and down in her neck and Shirley was finally tumbled into bed, shrieking with laughter. Nan tucked in the sheet and moved over to Bob who was stretched silent and grave on his pillow. Except for that first night when she had kissed his hair, Nan had never done more than lay a loving hand on him at parting.

"Like kissing?"

"Not much."

"All right; good-night, Bob."

She had turned out the light and reached her door when a husky voice followed her.

"Sometimes I don't mind."

In the darkness Bruce heard the rustle of Nan's dress as she moved quickly back to Bob's bed, then a low voice thrilling with understanding for a lonely boy.

"Good-night, Bob. Thanks."

It was soon after that that Nan first dared oppose Bob. He refused to leave the water when it was time. Nan called him as usual, pleasantly, but she might as well have summoned the butterflies and the bees. Bob, splashing serenely in the water, had assumed the deafness, the dumbness and the blindness of the dead. Three times Nan called, then she moved so swiftly upon Bob that he didn't know what had happened until he found himself being marched toward the bathhouse.

Suddenly he slumped in her arms to the sand and lay there eying Nan with the familiar gleam of battle in his eyes. Nan took the rope from the rowboat and tied Bob to a log firmly embedded in the sand.

"Now, Bob," she said quietly. "You are out of the water. And you will stay out. To-day and to-morrow and the next day. If you don't want to get dressed, you needn't. That isn't the important thing."

Then she disappeared in her bathhouse.

Bob, of course, went instantly into a rage. Nan, peering through a knot-hole, wondered about the rope. But the rope was apparently siding with Nan. It held. The sand also was siding with Nan, for it flew. With every frantic dig and twist of Bobby's body it covered him, finally landing in his mouth and eyes. Then his yells changed tune. Nan went to him instantly, untied him, washed out the sand and said nothing. Bob had punished himself and he knew it.

In some doubt Nan waited for the next day's swimming hour. But Bob had his pride. Nothing was suggested and nothing asked. He ignored Shirley and Nan in the water and busied himself digging in the sand. Nan rightfully felt somewhat encouraged, although she acknowledged that circumstances had helped her win this time. It was not a clear-cut victory for her alone.

Nan was just leaving the nursery a few nights later as Bruce entered.

"Miss Carter."

Nan paused in the doorway of her room.

"Yes?"

"May I see you for a few moments this evening?"

"Certainly, Mr. Wilson. After dinner?"

"Yes."

Nan wondered, as she came back after his departure and was undressing the children, what this summons could mean. Her month of trial was not yet over and she was vaguely disturbed. However, in slipping off exquisite clothes, kissing plump pink and white little bodies, washing dimpled hands and faces, Nan forgot the fear in the exultant thrills that ran through her. There was nothing so dear doing as baby caring, she thought, and when they knelt beside her,—Bob sometimes condescended —black head and golden head bent in short lisped prayer, she suddenly flung her own back with the swift uprushing flood of joy that was such a pain.

"Mine.—As much as though they really were!" her heart cried fiercely. "Mine!"

"All thoo!" Shirley's bright gaze met Nan's. Bobby rose in his dignified manly way. Nan slipped an arm about each and held them there.

"Anybody got a kiss for Nan?" she asked softly.

Shirley's adorable face was instantly thrust forward, then she wriggled away from the restraining embrace and leaped into her bed. Nan was left looking deep into Bobby's serious brown eyes. For a long minute she gazed steadily. Suddenly across her face slipped a smile, compelling in its utter sweetness. Bobby heaved a sigh and leaned closer.

"Bobby-boy, I like you," Nan whispered.

Bobby's grave eyes still met hers. Then in his slow deliberate way he carefully pressed a velvet cheek against her lips, drew away and walked sedately to bed.

It was his first voluntary offering. Nan had pierced the crust of the lad's reserve with her own sure gentle touch and she went down to Mr. Wilson happy.

The door stood open. Bruce was at his desk, papers spread before him, his head sunk in his two hands. Except for the one light on his desk the room was in soft darkness, only the white curtains showing vaguely as they fluttered in the breeze. Nan paused.

"Shall I come in?"

Bruce rose quickly.

"Oh, do."

Nan took the proffered chair and sat waiting silently. Bruce had gone over to the window and deliberately lit a pipe. Nan watched it brighten and glow and still waited. In the quiet of the room the clock and her heart seemed to be having a race. Why didn't he speak? Was he trying to tell her gently that she was a failure? She hadn't really believed the interview meant that but the silence became terrifying. Her throat was getting dry and

if he ever should speak, she knew she couldn't answer. She folded her hands tightly in her lap to hide their trembling.

"Why do you always leave the nursery as soon as you can after I come, Miss Carter?"

"Why ——" Nan breathed again. "I supposed you would like a little time alone with your children."

"Is that the reason, really?"

A flush stained Nan's cheeks, spreading down to her neck. It wasn't of course, but how ungracious and childish it would sound for her to tell him she didn't like men. He was no exception. And she wanted to keep away. She would have to explain *that,* in order not to be rude, and that would lead to revelations about her father, and her family life ——

"Yes, that's the reason," she replied.

Bruce settled himself in a deep chair in the shadows.

"Shirley is natural enough with me. She would be with anyone. But Bob stiffens up the moment you go away. I can't get anything out of him."

"He's afraid of you, Mr. Wilson," Nan said promptly. "You are, you know," she smiled, "rather a forbidding person. I should be afraid

myself if I were four instead of nearly twenty-four."

"How can I help it?" helplessly.

For a second Nan wanted to laugh, it seemed so ridiculous for this capable, self-sufficient man to be asking her advice like a little boy. But the next instant Nan realized that Bruce felt the lack of comradeliness between himself and his son, wanted to create it in these early days, because of a loneliness of spirit or a sense of duty—she wasn't sure which—and was at a loss how to begin. If this was what he had called her down for, she must give him her best help.

She sat forward, hands clasping her knee, her eyes intent with thought.

"I think, Mr. Wilson," she began, "you don't play enough. If you could only—only—kick up your heels," in all earnestness, "turn somersaults, play leap-frog,—anything like that—don't you see? Couldn't you?" she ended seriously.

For a second there was a silence, then came a chuckle from the window. Nan joined it. The mental picture of this tall, sedate man inverted—upset—curling over himself, had broken the ice between them.

"I think I'd better practice in my room," he said. "But—I really believe I could."

The boyishness in his voice surprised Nan. She leaned forward trying to see through the dusk of the room to his face. One could almost fancy a twinkle lurking in the depths of his eyes when he spoke like that.

"Try it!" she dared. "Bob will unbend too. See if he doesn't. You would really be more successful," she added thoughtfully, "if your somersault didn't sault—if it flopped, you know!"

"Thank you, Miss Carter." Bruce's dignity returned but there had been those few moments of light-hearted laughter between them. Never again would the formality be the same. "That's a difficult prescription you've given to remedy the trouble. My playing days seem a long way back. But to get back to the reason I called you down here. I appreciate your feeling about leaving me alone with my children. However, I wish you wouldn't, because Bob does shut himself up with me. I can come to know him better when I see him with you—until I learn to turn somersaults—and I want to know him. And because too, Miss Carter, I—you must realize I want to see *you* with my children. Their reaction to you. Yours to them. You remember that this month is to be a probation period."

At the look of alarm that leaped to Nan's eyes Bruce went on quickly:

"I am perfectly satisfied with all that I have seen. Rest assured on that, Miss Carter. But I have really seen very little. You understand, of course."

This led quite naturally to Nan's telling him about her first battle with Bob, and the kiss he had given her this evening.

"You are beginning to prove my theory, Miss Carter."

"That whippings are unnecessary, you mean?"

He nodded.

Nan pointed out that the circumstance of the sand filling Bob's eyes had helped her. She added that she had a feeling that their Waterloo had not yet been fought.

"Sometime it'll be just Bob and I, a battle between the two of us."

"After that?"

"After that—if I win—Bob will give me his love and trust."

"And some day some other woman will destroy that fine faith."

"Not in me," Nan denied quickly. "Bob can always count on me."

His lazy smile gave her the doubt. Nan flushed under it and cried out a little angrily:

"Because some one person has disappointed you, is it fair to conclude that everyone will?"

"Sooner or later they do, don't they?"

"Not people you *know*. Not people you believe in!" Nan suddenly stopped, remembering her father's bitter disappointment in the man whom he had called a friend.

"It's never happened to you directly," the man observed.

"No." Nan hunted for words to express herself clearly. "But if it ever did, I shouldn't let it—it shouldn't discolor my whole life."

"That's easy to say."

"But it can be done!" Nan leaned toward him in her eagerness to carry this thought to Bruce. "My father—didn't I see his life wrecked—his future and his dream smashed to bits—because someone he counted on failed him? And he—why do you know?—after the first hurt he insisted there was a mistake, a misunderstanding. His faith was wonderful."

"Beautiful, no doubt, but blind. He was shutting his eyes—pretending."

"Maybe he was. But that, you see, is what I mean. His pretending—if it was that, I don't believe it was—kept life from being ugly for the rest of us."

Bruce shrugged, smiling, and Nan sat back discouraged. She could not impress this man with her

beliefs. He was set solidly, one way. Had he always been so? Nan believed not! But until something or somebody undid what was done, she was rushing against a stone wall.

With some effort, the conversation shifted. Nan, recalling the evening, could not exactly remember how they slipped so easily into discussion of books, music and distant places. Rather was it a monologue than a discussion, for Nan was empty of such knowledge and Bruce was apparently full of it. He came out of the shadowy dusk to bring forth pictures, to pull down books from the cases about his walls, to point out and explain a loved etching on the mantelpiece over the fireplace. He talked easily, with interest and without arrogance, and Nan came away with a spirit eager for far journeyings, eyes lightened with dreams of it, and a heart of wonder that she had so enjoyed herself for two solid hours with a hated man.

After that Nan did not leave the nursery when Bruce came there at dusk time. She stayed on, but she sank into the background. She was natural, but determinedly unobtrusive. This hour was the father's and he should have it. He was, of necessity, pushed out of the shadows of the wing-chair and made to stand before the footlights. It was Nan's turn to observe and with a sinking heart she

saw his painful and useless efforts to make a place for himself in his son's heart, to open his own mind and heart to the boy. Self-consciousness kept him stiff while the child could not sense the situation to the slightest degree. He answered in monosyllables; suggestions were received in unruffled calm; corrections in a silence that had an atmosphere of inner rebellion. As for playing,—it simply couldn't be done. Once—oh, that once!—Bruce Wilson got down on his hands and knees to play bear. Shirley regarded him with startled eyes, then ran for a pillow.

"Is Daddy sick?" she asked in the softest and most pitying of baby voices.

Bob stood and stared.

"You look queer," he remarked and moved to his hobby horse.

Nan rushed from the background to the foreground with laughter in her throat and sympathy in her eyes. But that was Bruce's last attempt to "kick up his heels."

At the end of the month Nan was again summoned to the den and engaged to remain for an indefinite period. Her spirit took wings. She saw herself settled for life, visiting Shirley at college, chaperoning Bob's parties —— It was all too delightful and too easy to make dreams come true.

Starry-eyed, vibrant with joy, she stood before Bruce and told him so. He smiled down at her out of grave eyes.

"I am happy that *you* are, Miss Carter," he said simply. "I only hope you won't wake up to find your dream—a dream."

"But I'm awake now—and living it!" she cried. "You don't believe that, do you?"

He shook his head. "We never wake up till the dreams are over," he said and then changed the subject swiftly. "There's another thing, Miss Carter. Do you think Bob will be ready to go to school this fall?"

Nan grew troubled.

"He'll be five, won't he? Yes, he's old enough, but oh! Mr. Wilson, don't send him!"

"And why, please?"

"Oh, because ——" Nan struggled with her thought. "So many teachers don't care about teaching children anything but things. They never teach them *thinks*. Do you see? And Bob's been two and a half years without a mother to teach him. He's really not ready—if you know what I mean."

"I think I do."

"I'd like another winter with him, please, Mr. Wilson," Nan told him earnestly, her eyes as be-

seeching as her voice. "Maybe by then we'll be all caught up with the years. I'll start a kindergarten myself, if you want," she suggested.

Bruce contemplated the girl before him. His grave, deliberate regard annoyed her. He was still studying her! He didn't believe in her sincerity, in her honest desire to get the best out of Bob. Here she was, sparing no thought, no effort, no love—giving them all eagerly, gladly,—and he looked as though he thought she were playing a game.

"I really would like to do that," she said simply. "Please believe it."

"I'm trying to, but it's so surprisingly selfless of you."

"It's not selfless at all. It's honest. I'm not half earning my salary for one thing. And I'm just selfish enough to want to make you proud of Bob, then I'll take the credit. Please let me!"

"You're more than earning it, Miss Carter," he corrected with that courteous gentleness of his. "However, if you care to assume another task, I think it would be an excellent idea."

Nan came away satisfied yet with a sense of bafflement. She had won her way. Bruce had proved that by engaging her to stay on, by permitting her to teach Bob. But she had not yet won Bruce's confidence. He was—he was—Nan puzzled over it.

Suspicious of her—that was it. He acted as though he thought she were after something other than the joy of doing a loved piece of work, and her money honestly earned. He questioned her dream too—laughed at it, probably. Because he had ceased to dream. Oh well, what did it matter what he thought?

Here she was and here she'd stay and *fiddlesticks!* for Bruce Wilson's notions about her. She didn't care. For that matter she was suspicious of him. No man could be as nice as he apparently was at home without being villainously villainly at his office to make up for it. Pooh! anyhow.

CHAPTER VII

THERE was a lily-filled pond in the shade of great elms at the rear of the big house. To this almost every afternoon came Nan and the two children. There were fishes darting about in the cool clear depths of this miniature lake; pop-eyed panting frogs, and queer little turtles were to be found along the grassy banks. There was too, a boat, wide and clean and comfortable with cushions, if you wished to go out and peer into the homes of the fairies in the hope of catching one napping. But though the lilies, floating serenely on their green foundations, were always there, nodding a welcome to you, the fairies never were. You just had to believe they flew there in the gloaming, cuddled deep in the curve of petals, and were swung to sleep in the breezes.

You might possibly catch the fairies in their lily homes, or you might catch them in the Magic Ring. There was always the choice, difficult of settlement; always the thrilling chance of being lucky after the choice had been made. Bob favored the lilies because of the necessity of a voyage in the boat. Shirley favored the Magic Ring.

The Magic Ring, as of course you know, is a

circle of fine soft grass, often to be found under big trees at the edge of just such a pool as this one that lay to the right of the flower-scented garden. No one knows why the grass is finer here, but the fact of its being danced over by fairy feet on moonlight nights at the stroke of twelve, is never to be questioned. Once Shirley found a wee red cap. It fitted over her littlest finger and in its exact centre was a tiny bell. It might have dropped from a fairy head. Nan didn't say it did, but then—neither did she say it didn't.

At any rate, believing in fairies made the world lovelier and the days much more full of possible surprises, and Nan of the believing heart and the eyes wide with dear fancies, came into the hearts of her children because she could so surely and sweetly "pretend."

It was a day in early August, a day all shimmering with the gold of the sun. Shade from the trees lay mottled dark on the grass. Phlox, dripping its multicolored petals, flung a tender fragrance over the border of hedge about the garden close by. Bubbles floated from black depths to the surface of the water and burst with a noiseless pop, ringing a tiny widening ripple to the shore.

In the Magic Circle sat Shirley and Bob and Nan. The hot day was temperish and Nan looked from

Shirley's red face to Bob's scowling dark one. A quarrel seemed imminent.

"I tell you what," she cried suddenly, and at the mere sound of her voice scowl and threatening tears vanished. "Let's pull off our shoes and stockings and stick our feet in the water!"

The swim of the day being over, and the children dressed clean, this was indeed an occasion. It smacked of holidayness, almost of disobedience. Only disobeying this way was sure to be unmitigated fun, for the punisher was naughty too!

Off came Nan's shoes and stockings, first of all, and into the cool water slid three pairs of white feet.

"No splashing, Bob, because I really *don't* want you to get your clothes wet."

"No 'pashin'," Shirley repeated. "Oh! Heah come Daddy!"

He was not only coming. He was there. Nan turned her head to see the man in his white suit not six paces behind her in the centre of the Magic Ring. Well, he could see what he could see, and if it didn't bother him, it certainly shouldn't her. Didn't she go barelegged in swimming? At any rate nothing could be done about it now. Hiding wet feet under a very short pink dress was not only ruinous to the dress, but a difficult gymnastic stunt

as well, and the thing to be always was straightforward.

So Nan turned a face rosily brave toward the intruder, and her gray eyes met surprised brown ones levelly.

"We're keeping cool, Mr. Wilson, as best we can. Won't you—join us?" demurely.

"I'm tempted to." He flung himself on the bank behind Bob. This casual acceptance of the circumstances made them no longer circumstances. Nan and Bruce glanced at her bare feet as Bob and Shirley did. "The city was too hot for me to-day. I had to come back. Thank God for gardens."

"Even if all the trouble in the world started there?" Nan laughed.

"And if all the puddles were put together it would be a pond, wouldn't it, Nan?" Bob was chasing a thought into the open begun some moments back in the dark recesses of his mind.

"Yes, dear." Nan loved his slow way of thinking things out.

"And if all the ponds were put together it would be as big and as big-deep and as big-across as our house, wouldn't it, Nan?"

"Probably, Bob-boy."

"And then," Bob drew a long delighted breath.

"Why then, we'd have to be fishes. Wouldn't we, Nan?"

Nan flashed an amused smile at Bruce Wilson. She began to see light.

"Of course, and we'd have to be swimming all the time. You'd love that, wouldn't you, Bob?"

"How many strokes can you do now?" his father asked.

Bobby half turned to face him, one foot drawn partly out of the water. Pridefully he made answer.

"Four. I can do four strokes an' I'm four years old. How many can you do?"

"If you are four and can do four, how many do you suppose I can do?"

Bobby regarded him gravely.

"Most a hundred."

Nan's laughter danced across the water.

"You got yourself into trouble, Mr. Wilson."

"And how many do you think Nan can do?" Brown eyes held black eyes gravely.

"Maybe—ten."

Bruce sat up, clasped his arms about his knees and looked at Nan with a mock sternness that hid something deeper.

"Bobby's arithmetic lessons must begin to-

morrow, Miss Nan. The child has no sense of ——"

"Time," Nan leaning back on both hands, smiled up at her employer over her shoulder. "But I think he did very well, considering."

The teasing light in Nan's eyes died as she looked at him. Why, the man had *minded*. He had actually minded being thought a hundred by a child to whom numbers meant nothing.

"You're foolish to take it to heart," she told him out of a quick motherly compassion.

Bruce rose and looked down at her. There was burning in his eyes an intensity of longing and hopelessness that shocked her.

"It's not so much the actual numerical calculation," he said. "I understand that ignorance has exaggerated that, of course. It's the idea back of the words, do you see? The belief that I'm outside, beyond, out of reach. It's lonely business—being out of reach." He turned abruptly and swung away through the trees to the house.

Nan sat staring at her white feet in the water. Bob and Shirley, scrambling up suddenly, went turtle hunting. She was alone for a few moments, alone with her thoughts that she faced with her usual honesty.

"He might just as well have told me—his eyes

did—that I was keeping him out, because I'm not helping him *in*. That's what he meant, and it's true. But he was too proud to say it. Too everlastingly stiff-backed to ask for help." Nan plunged a round chin into a curved palm. "I don't blame him. *I'd* hate to ask for help too. I'd rather fight it through myself, but if it was a losing fight—I don't know."

Nan's thoughts running along clear and sharp, suddenly came to a stop with a click. What was that new one ahead of her, blocking her way, looming big?

Bruce Wilson loved those children as much as she did! They were his, not by the potent charm of simply believing them to be, but in actual reality they were his. And yet they weren't as much his as they should be. Weren't as much his as they were hers.

"Oh! I know!" Nan cried softly to herself. "I know now how he feels. Supposing I couldn't get in, wanting to and loving them so? And then supposing they were really mine and I couldn't?"

Nan was silent before the stark tragedy of this thought. And then swiftly, clearly the machinery of her mind began moving again.

"There's nothing to do but help him. Whether I like him or not has nothing to do with it. He

wants Bob's love, Shirley's trust, and I'm the only one can help him get them. Why ——" Nan's idea almost ran ahead of her. "This is where the service of my dream comes in, I guess,—the service Dad talked about."

Having decided on her course of action, Nan wasted no time beginning the pursuit of it. Shirley's birthday—she would be three—was the fifteenth of August. On that day Nan would begin inching Mr. Wilson into the hearts of his children. Inching him in! No! An idea came to her, the audacity of which left her breathless. For a second she hesitated. Then she nodded decisively. Inch him in—nothing! She would *bounce* him in, irresistibly, and if he understood, he would laugh with her. Once he laughed, with her and at himself, he would have a good hold on the fringe of his desire.

Nan did not make her plans alone. Miss Burton was hailed in as a fellow conspirator and though her doubt trailed out in many sentences, she nevertheless hurried with a fluttering reassurance to prop Nan's courage when it wobbled. And the children were co-workers too. For half the fun of birthday parties lies in the anticipation of events, the gloating over mysteries that others are itching to know.

Bob had a secret from Shirley—his present to

her. Shirley and Nan had a secret from Bob—the kind of ice-cream. Nan had a secret from the two of them—oh! two or three secrets,—as to other presents, other guests, other happenings. And Nan and Miss Burton had a secret from Bruce. For he was to be—all unknown to himself—he was to be the guest of honor. He was to be marched blindfolded, through the garden, to the Picnic Place, and then be presented ——

But wait.

The day arrived. Just such a day as should be for a birthday. It was born green and gold and smiling early in the morning, and it stayed green and gold and smiling all day. At five o'clock a beautiful breeze had cooled it, and blown the dust off its face, and it was just settling contentedly in the tops of the trees for a peep at the party before it slid away into the darkness of the night.

On the edge of the lily-filled pool danced Shirley, a sunbeam in her yellow dress with her golden curls flying about her face. Or wasn't she more a flower, Nan wondered, as she looked at the child's face, so delicately colored and shaped, a flower, nodding and swaying in utterly unconscious grace.

Bob, in a white suit that made his hair and eyes look blacker, was manfully helping Agnes carry a basket to the Picnic Place. His face, in one month

of Nan's wise loving, had lost its habitual sullenness. Now, as he tugged the heavy thing across the grass, lifting his head to grunt directions to the maid beside him, Nan thought she had never seen a finer looking boy. There was about him a quality of strength and purpose and thought that was striking in so young a lad. Seeing his black eyes flash a smile into hers Nan's heart warmed and expanded.

"Bruce *shall* know him," she decided. "Oh! I hope I can put it over!"

A white cloth was spread over the Magic Ring, a big bowl of goldenrod stood in the centre, plates of sandwiches piled high held down each corner; there was teetering uncertainly, under Agnes' watchful gaze, a big pitcher of milk. And out of sight behind a tree, presumably unseen and unsuspected, reposed the ice-cream freezer and something round and large, hidden under a napkin.

Suddenly Nan blew a whistle. Shirley and Bob stared surprised. Nan was gazing at the tree tops. Agnes retreated to a respectful distance.

Nan brought her gaze down.

"I invited the fairies to the party, Shirley," she told the round-eyed eager children, "and until today I thought they were coming. But they sent me word at the last moment that they were so busy mixing up paints for the fall coloring of mountainsides,

that they really couldn't come. They have to gather all the colors from the flowers, you know, and it's heavy work finding flowers this time of year. Most of them are dry and dusty and dead. So the fairies have to travel far by day and work long at night filling their paint boxes and they asked to be excused.

" They did, however, promise to send one guest,—a mortal. He may seem at first dull and uninteresting to you, but you must remember that the *fairies* sent him. He is, I believe, related to them, and on certain occasions he is given the power to make wishes come true. Now shut your eyes tight—and I'll blow this whistle the fairies left me. He'll come when he hears it."

The children squeezed their eyes tight shut and Nan put the silver whistle to her lips.

Down through the garden and around the pool came Miss Burton, leading Bruce, blindfolded, by the hand. For a brief second, Nan thought she must be crazy to attempt such foolishness with such a monument of dignity and common sense as Bruce had always been, with a man who gave the charm of make-believe no room. But the next instant she caught her courage with both hands. Simultaneously eyes flew open and a bandage was slipped off. To call the look in the children's faces disappoint-

ment, would not be giving it a name at all. Disgust, incredulity and a wavering peeping doubt of their beloved Nan were mingled there. And Bruce's helpless bewilderment nearly numbed Nan's imagination. She plunged in.

"Why, Daddy Wilson! Are *you* related to the fairies? What a surprise this is!" Up she walked to the man and gave him a swift clear glance that bade him play up. Then she put out both hands to him and drew him closer. "I think it's simply wonderful," she cried, clinging to him with one hand and stretching out the other to Bob, "that right here in our family is a man who knows as much about the fairies as we do—and we never knew it. Haven't we been geese?"

She laughed down into two faces that were now all wonderment.

"And we'd never have known, if Shirley hadn't happened to be three to-day, and if we hadn't happened to invite the fairy-folk themselves, and if they hadn't happened to be too busy to come."

"Can you *really* make wishes come true?" Bob stood straightly before his astounding father and demanded an honest man-to-man answer.

"It depends, of course, on the wishes," Bruce told him, and Nan's heart, which had been tattooing in various measures of time, skipped a beat, then

settled down to a restful rhythm. She breathed, and flashed a triumphant look to Miss Burton. "Not being a fairy I can't make them all come true. But some—I believe I could.

"It was stupid of the fairies, I think," he went on, "not to tell me it was a birthday party I was coming to. I'm not prepared, not at all." He plunged his hands into his coat pockets, then with dawning amazement on his face pulled them both out—full. "I apologize to the fairies; they always know what they're about. Here are the presents for the birthday girl."

A doll, of course, and a box of crayons.

"Might be wise, Bob, to help Shirley go through other pockets." Bruce stood, smiling down into his son's face. He was assuming a comradeliness he didn't feel. Nan, watching from the corner of her eyes as she and Miss Burton made the last preparations for the feast, applauded him heartily. He was playing up—the old sport! Grabbing this chance she had given him and hanging tight! And his assumption was fooling Bob. It was. She saw the little fellow's stiffness suddenly melt as he went seriously and methodically about the business of finding more presents coming almost direct from the fairies.

It was a success. From start to finish it was a

success. Nan, of course, with her spirited whimsy, her swift snatching of awful moments from the brink of disaster, her unselfish determination, made it so. But they all helped. Miss Burton, weaving a daisy chain and gravely crowning Bruce King of the Fairies, did her share toward keeping the nonsense alive. And Bruce, oh! Bruce was splendid! There was laughter in his grave eyes at last! Laughter at himself, at the sweetly silly deception, at Nan who had so high-handedly managed the affair. There he sat, this erstwhile serious employer of hers, the leaves tickling his ears, a flower tapping his forehead, his suit grass-stained, his hands dirty and sticky from dishing out ice-cream. But in his eyes was contentment, a look as of one who has at last reached a journey's end. As he listened to Bob's questions and, carefully aided and abetted by Nan, made tolerable replies to a mind where doubt still lingered, there was on his face a serene sureness that he could convince the lad. The straining ache to please, to reach, was gone. By a miracle Bruce had entered the realm that belongs to childhood and by his own efforts he would stay.

Nan saw that resolution in his face, recognized it in his casual instigating of "stunts" after a mountainous meal that had been topped by chocolate

ice-cream and a snow white cake all candlelit. He delved with some difficulty into the wells of his memory but succeeded—mind you!—succeeded in recalling gymnastic feats dear to the heart of a four-year-old-boy-most-five. Bruce, with his collar and coat off, on his back on the grass, with Bob balanced nicely on his hands and feet, was a new sight, but somehow he did not this time look queer.

"It's the spirit of a thing that makes it right," Nan discovered. "His spirit's in it now."

After the gymnastic exhibition came a rest. The day had slid from the tree tops to the edge of the sky and was lingering there in a golden glory. About them and above, birds were flutteringly finding a resting place for the night, and a thousand insects had begun their evening chorus.

"It's time now," Nan said, "for the Wishes."

"For what?" Bob asked.

"For the Wishes. For you, Mr. Wilson, to do what the fairies sent you to do. On birthdays, you know, one has only to stand in the very exact centre of this Magic Ring and make a wish and it is sure to come true."

Bob's eyes kindled. Shirley hopped about excitedly.

"Shirley, step in first, and everyone keep still as still. Shut your eyes, Shirley-girly, and say it out

loud. What do you want most, wee darling? Say it so the fairies can hear."

Shirley's eyes squinted shut; then flew open.

"Wanta piece—a cake—more!" she shouted.

Nan nodded to Bruce and he gravely cut and handed her one.

"Your wish has come true. Now, Bob."

Bob entered the circle and pondered deeply. Then with eyes on his father he lifted his head and said slowly:

"I wish there could be a party every night."

"Oh, but Bob," Nan hurried to the rescue of the discomfited King of the Fairies. "Then it wouldn't be a party, don't you see? It's having them few—and once in a while—that makes them partified. Otherwise they'd be just regular suppers. I think you'd better say that again—differently. Wish for one every month or two. The fairies would be more likely to think it could happen."

So Bob, accepting this logic, remodelled his wish and the Honored Guest nodded gravely.

A whispered colloquy took place.

"My birthday is in September and yours ——"

"In October, of course!" Nan's eyes danced.

"And then comes Thanksgiving and Christmas. I guess I can manage that wish, though it's a responsibility."

"Which has its pleasures. Now, Miss Burton!" Nan called.

Miss Burton took the centre of the Magic Circle and with a smile for the harassed relative of the fairies said:

"Oh! I wish for a cooler day to-morrow and a thunderstorm to-night to make it so."

"Do my best," he promised. "It seems likely."

"Now it's your turn," Nan turned to the King.

"But fairies don't wish," Bob objected. "They don't have to."

"He's a mortal most of the time, and mortals always have wishes."

Bruce gave a sudden queer glance at Nan, then strode to the centre of the Wishing Ring.

"I wish," and his look, with a new fire in it, swept the little company and rested on Nan, "I wish the happiness I have had to-day may stay with me through all the days, forever and ever, till the end of time."

Nan was in his place almost before he had left it. The last rays of the sun slipped through a crack and rested on the gold of her hair; then suddenly the crack widened and Nan in her pale blue dress was bathed in the dying glory of it. Slim and straight she stood, her great gray eyes smiling tenderly into first one face then another.

"And I wish," she said softly, "that everybody's wishes may come true."

The children were in bed. Nan, remembering the beautifully dressed doll she had tucked in the branches of a tree and had left there, slipped downstairs, across the side verandah, through the garden and out to the lily-filled pool. She found the doll but the place was too beautiful to leave.

The moon was full. In its silver light, sifted through the high tree tops, the black waters sparkled here and there as little breezes ruffled its calm. A bullfrog sounded its deep fog-horn on the bank—a near echo to distant rolls of thunder,—and there came to Nan's senses as she sat in the sweet stillness the flash and dip of some tiny thing homing in the water. She was happy—so happy.

A step behind her made Nan turn her head. Before she could speak or move Bruce had dropped beside her and sat silently finishing a cigarette. Then he flipped it into the water and turned to face her suddenly.

"I saw you come out and I came to thank you," he said simply.

"It was nothing."

"Nothing to you perhaps. Everything to me.

You've given me the start I needed. I can go on now."

Nan nodded.

"You played up splendidly," she said. They smiled at each other, then she went on.

"You see now, don't you, some little use in pretending?"

He admitted he thought he did. But still, when they grew too old for this fairy and Santa Claus nonsense—what then?

"It will be a hurting time. Disillusionment always is," he told her.

"Yes, but——" Nan paused. Hurting times came anyway, and pretending, believing,—whatever you wanted to call it—did help you through them. It could grow to be a habit. One could carry fancy into the grown-up years. She faced him suddenly.

"Mr. Wilson, you are having, or have had, a hurting time yourself. Isn't anything helping you through it? Some belief about something?"

He stared at her so long she began to feel uncomfortable. It had been daring. But she would not drop her eyes. She had only been trying to drive a point home, trying to help. At last he drew a long breath and answered her.

"I'm—not sure."

"There is beauty in life, you know," she said

softly, "if you believe in it. But you've got to believe to see." She was afraid she was preaching so she went on lightly: "Why, I believe so firmly in the existence of fairies—Good Luck and Bad Luck Fairies—that I can actually hear them laugh sometimes."

"All right, Miss Nan, have it your way. It's a sweeter way than mine, I admit, and if pretending will get me close to Bob I'll play the game. I'm trusting to your intuition."

"Thank you."

"And now," he told her, "I want you to make another wish."

"Why?" surprised.

"Because you didn't wish for yourself and a wish in a Magic Ring is no good unless it's a wish for your very self. Of course you didn't know that. That's where it's an advantage to be related to the fairies, as I am." He was up and helping her. "Step into the circle, Miss Carter—and make another. The King of Fairies commands it."

"But I haven't anything left to wish for! Truly! All my wishes have come true!"

He looked at her sharply, with that hint of suspicion in his eyes, a questioning of her sincerity.

"More money? More leisure?" he suggested.

Nan stiffened, then stepped swiftly into the ring,

lifted her face to the silver moonlight and her white arms to the fairies hidden in the night.

"I wish, little fairy-folk, you'd make that man over there believe in me—believe in me hard. That's all."

Out she stepped and stood head upflung to face that very man.

"Why did you wish that?"

"Because you don't, and because it hurts not to have you. I've never had anyone not believe me before. I like to be trusted. I can't *bear* to have you doubt me. That's the first reason."

She paused in her rush of words.

"What's the second?"

They were standing close together in the moonlight, Nan's look plunged deep into his. She was determined to wipe away that miserable distrust. Her next words came from her heart, not her head.

"You seem so lonely, Mr. Wilson. So shut away from people,—from the warmth of them. I thought if you could trust me, you'd be opening a little door in yourself that would let some of the warmth of you *out* and the warmth of other people *in*. Do you see?"

For a long second their looks held, his delving into the very heart of her. Then he spoke slowly.

"I do trust you, Nan Carter. I do trust you. I

learned to to-day when you made your first wish, but being a suspicious soul, I wanted to make sure. But I do." He squared his shoulders as though a weight were off them. "And with the trust," he went on, "there has crept back into my heart a bit of beauty that has been gone a long time."

"I'm so glad," Nan's hand touched his sleeve lightly. He caught and held it.

"But *you* don't trust *me*," he said quietly. "Do you?"

"Why, yes I do!" The words came impulsively. But it was true. She did trust him—one of those distrusted men—and in the sudden white light of truth that blazed in on her for a second, she bravely told herself that she not only trusted him but she liked him.

It was a stupendous and upheaving moment for a confirmed man-hater. Nan felt the need to be alone till she had got used to the companionship of this new idea.

She flung him a swift upward glance, breathed a soft good-night, and vanished into the silver-streaked blackness.

CHAPTER VIII

If Nan didn't hate Bruce, why didn't she? If she really did like him, could trust him, as she had involuntarily admitted there in the darkness of the pool, how had it come about? Did this difference in her feeling toward Bruce change her antipathy toward men in general? Had it been brought about through Bruce himself or through a gradual growth on Nan's own part,—a growth she had been unaware of during the weeks?

These questions struggled from an inner darkness in Nan to light. She faced each one honestly as it rose, answered it courageously and turned to meet the next. It became clear to her finally that the hatred she had believed she held in her heart for all men had never been genuine. It was a hand-me-down, in the time of her adolescence, as her clothes had been, from her mother. It was her mother's hatred that she had nourished for so many years of her life. She herself had never known, truly, what hate was. Any more than she knew now what love was.

She did not hate because something deep within her had never been touched; her beliefs had never been shaken; her illusions had never been shattered. If this ever happened,—if, for instance, she ever

discovered that the trust she put in someone she cared about had been abused, then she might hate. Would she? She wondered. Would she hate, as her mother had, or would she, instead, develop a larger faith, an overlooking kindness, a steadfast belief in the ultimate beneficence of hurt, as her father had? She didn't know. She would never know until the time came, but she hoped tremendously she would be able to do what she had declared to Bruce she would do—keep it from discoloring her life.

She had, then, tricked herself all these years. She had not really hated men. She had not really hated the man who had bought their antiques for a song. What she had felt was a momentary blaze of anger, but hadn't it been partly her fault that she had been cheated? Having something to sell she should have found out its value, known what to demand in way of payment. That was business. And Mr. Ketcham—the man who had foreclosed the mortgage—for him she had felt scorn, white hot, but now —— She wondered at herself. She had no feeling for him now except one of great pity. He was putting such foolish stress on the material possessions of life when what mattered most, what was of most priceless value, were the treasures, the memories he put into his heart through the years.

How much richer he would really be, if he could look back now and know that he had left the Carters in their little home until they had somehow, someway, managed to pay off the mortgage.

What a tangle she had been in! Preaching to Bruce what she had never practiced,—the keeping of a fine faith in people.—And he had known. That was why he had lazily laughed at her, easily doubted. He knew she was saying one thing and doing another. He knew she was not trusting him. Was he aware, too, that she hadn't really known what she was talking about? That until that revealing moment on the night of Shirley's birthday her words had had no real root in her being? No, that wasn't right. They had had a root, but no real branching and flowering. Her faith in people had actually existed all this time in her innermost being, had lain like a seed in her heart waiting for light and warmth, but it had yet to spring to life.

Something within Nan was stretching and growing. Introspection was a new business to her, but it began to fill much of her time. She must do it. Must discover this unknown person who had been silently with her through the years. Because, until she did, until she knew herself, she could not live her utmost, could not reach the heights and depths that a full life offered. And she wanted to. Nan

was vaguely aware at last that this existence was not fully satisfying her, that children and money and beauty could not exhaust her capacity for joy as she had dreamed they could. Something else was needed.

That was puzzling—and a little bit disturbing. Nan would not keep it with her. If she did, this serenity that had so recently come to her with her discovery about not hating, would be troubled. Everything was moving too smoothly now for her to begin to imagine she had another want, another longing unfulfilled. Besides, if she didn't know what it was, why bother? Nan finally ceased her self-analysis, accepted quietly the fact of her new trust in Bruce, in all men,—and lived in a waiting calm.

What she was waiting for she didn't know. Sometimes a tremor of excitement seized her, a strange intuition that unguessed struggles were but a short way ahead of her. Would they be with Bob? They must be. The intuitive feeling that she was not yet mistress of the situation where Bob was concerned, stayed by her. But nothing seemed to happen.

The days melted, one by one, until September, breathless and weary, dragged its dusty feet into the year. The first week seemed endless and unbear-

able, but as nothing ever is either endless or unbearable, Nan and the children woke one morning to find a day drenched in rain. After that September lifted its bruised head and continued the march of time with a brisker step.

Through the weeks Bruce's visits to the nursery or the pond or the shore, or wherever Nan and his children might happen to be, were an almost daily occurrence. And he brought with him, usually, a flavor of excitement in the shape of a message from the fairies, a new story—Bruce developed quite an aptitude for story telling—or an unexpected excursion of some sort. There was the time, when in a mysterious whirl of excitement, Nan flew about superintending the packing of a lunch basket and a suitcase of clothes. This was followed by a jubilant stowing away of possessions and people—Miss Burton and Agnes included—into the automobile.

Bob sat in the front seat close up next to Dad and with his little hands under the big ones and his face tremendously sober with the responsibility, helped him steer the car. Once Dad let him do it alone. Bob thrilled. Then a fly tickled his nose, his hands flew to his face and Dad barely saved them from a spill in the ditch.

There had been two hours of driving through country of a beauty that filled Nan with a solemn

ecstasy. Stretches of rough space colored by queer little flowers of purple and yellow; wind-swept places bare of everything but a spiky green grass; sand dunes thrusting their yellow heads up suddenly out of a flat earth, and, always unexpectedly, a stream of bluest blue water rivalling the sky overhead.

They had finally arrived at a yacht club; had repacked themselves in a sailboat and had gone skipping out over the water under a billowing white sail. They had lunch here; then while Shirley was asleep in the cabin, the two men of the party, after anchoring the boat, slipped over the side for a swim. Bob wore a life-preserver, and looked like a little dog with his black hair plastered flat over his forehead and his big eyes gleaming soberly below.

That day marked an advance in the understanding that was growing between Bruce and his boy. The man appreciated at last that Bob's nature, so different from Shirley's, could not easily give expression to his deepest moments. He no longer sought to stir enthusiasm or response in the lad, but with a keen glance at the intent young face beside him, he would reach out and pat a bare brown knee quietly. Sometimes Bob paid no attention, sometimes he flashed a bright glance into his father's

eyes, but usually there was a little sigh of contentment, a little wiggle of joy that Nan and Bruce never missed seeing.

That was a day of days—but there were others. There was the afternoon when Bruce hurried in to say that business took him out to a small town in New Jersey. If Nan could get the children ready they would all go. Never mind about supper—they'd stop somewhere.

The big car was being repaired, so Agnes and Miss Burton were left at home. Nan with Shirley on her lap and Bob squeezed silently between her and Bruce, somehow made herself comfortable in the roadster.

"Lucky you're not much bigger than the children," Bruce smiled and Nan smiled back as wordlessly as Bob.

Their objective that day was a farm, a real old-fashioned down-at-the-heel farm. Bob and Shirley were entranced. They hung fascinated over the pig-pen; they ran with delighted cries of terror from the turkey gobbler; they had a wonderful ride on the top of a mountainous haymow; they saw cows being milked and rabbits running about loose, and at last there came supper of milk and rusk and apple sauce given them by a grateful woman who sang Bruce's praises into his burning ears. Nan

mischievously made the woman tell the story,—how she and her good husband had been unable to meet a promissory note; how the villain had threatened suit; how, weeping, she had gone, all unknown to her husband, to Mr. Wilson because he had helped a friend of a friend of hers once, and she hadn't known what else to do; and how he had happened to know the man and had exerted pressure or influence enough to win for the old couple an extension of sixty days. He had remembered the sixty days was up to-day and had come all the way to see if they were keeping the promise that he had assured the man they would; and how finally, what with the fine apple crop, they had the money and were going to make the payment to-night.

The ride home was a silent one. Shirley fell asleep in Nan's arms almost at once; Bob's head dropped suddenly against her, after a terrific battle when Bruce and Nan had smiled over its determined jerks back to uprightness. Then, with the sky paling before them, and the smooth road unwinding beneath them, the two grown-ups became absorbed in their own thoughts.

Nan's thoughts were all of the man beside her. She stole a look at his profile. There was a grim strength in the lines from his cheek to his chin, that was offset by the steady kindness of his brown eyes

and the sweetness of his smile. He had a trustworthy look. Nan was glad she had discovered it for herself before to-day, glad she had found his likable qualities before she heard the story the woman had told her; glad that having found that she could trust and like him she was letting herself do it as whole-heartedly as she had kept herself distrusting and hating before. This liking game made the world a so much dearer place than hating. It filled her all up with a beautiful satisfying calm and peace and she had a queer feeling that it would last, that no matter what happened she would believe in him and his goodness. It was a wonderful feeling to rest on.

Darkness came and the stars stole out, one by one, until the heavens were jewelled in their most extravagant manner. The air, sweet and cool, blew against Nan's hot face. She pressed her lips against Shirley's curls, then put her head back with a little sigh of contentment.

Bruce heard it and glanced at her.

"Tired?"

"Oh, no. That was—bliss."

Another mile sped away then Nan said:

"That was nice of you to bother to help that woman."

"All in the day's work," he returned carelessly.

"But lots of men wouldn't have thought so."

There was a ringing quality of earnestness in his voice new to Nan as he made answer.

"Well, perhaps I have a little more reason than most for lending a helping hand."

This fell into silence until Bruce lifted the thought again and carried it further.

"My father made me feel that having wealth was a privilege and a responsibility. I have no right to spend it all on myself and those dear to me. I am, in a way, a custodian of money that belongs to other people. Someone becomes poor when someone else becomes rich." He paused.

"Oh, that's true!" Nan cried with such an intensity of feeling that Bruce turned to look at her. But she had closed her lips lightly and was staring ahead. After all, why rake up bitter memories now when the present was so beautiful? She shook her head at Bruce's unspoken question and he finished lightly.

"So, when one less fortunate than I comes into my path, I do my little best, trying not to hurt pride or remove initiative."

"That's splendid." Nan's warm smile met his grave face.

"Some day I hope to find the person—or persons—whom our getting rich made poor."

"I should think that would be easy."

"It isn't. Lives shift, change, go out,—so fast—and I didn't hear the story till I was a man."

Bruce carried his sleeping boy into the house while Nan bore Shirley's featherweight. In the darkness the two children were undressed. Then the two grown-ups stood by the beds a silent moment, until Nan held out a hand, whispered good-night and slipped into her room.

That was the last excursion the four of them had together. With cooler days Bruce stayed more regularly and later in the office. His daily visits lessened to three or four a week and when he did come there was usually an abstracted look in his face that puzzled Nan. It went on the instant the children set upon him, but it returned whenever they were absorbed alone or by Nan. Nan wondered, but accepted Bruce's regretful explanation that business had its troubles now and then and his business seemed to be needing at present a careful and constant guidance through turbulent waters. He said it with a smile and Nan dismissed her slight misgiving.

At the end of September there came a three days' rain. It was difficult to keep the children amused and peaceful by the end of the second, but on the afternoon of the third Nan's ingenuity had been

quite exhausted and her patience nearly so. She left Bob and Shirley in the nursery after starting them at the stringing of buttons and beads and slipped into her room to drop on the swing on her porch.

The rain had ceased and the thick gray clouds seemed to be lightening. A wind chased vague filmy shreds across the sky and Nan, watching, hoped fervently that the weather would change before morning. She was tired. She closed her eyes just as an angry cry from Shirley came to her ears. Then the little girl burst into heart-broken sobs. Nan sprang up.

In the nursery Bob had retreated to a corner with all the beads and buttons. Shirley's string lay broken on the floor and she stood with the tears streaming down her face.

"Did Bobby tate all Tirley's beads!" she cried, "an'—an'—wouldn't div her any."

"But, Bobby dear," Nan moved over to him, with Shirley's hand in hers, "that's not fair, you know. It isn't fair for you to have them all. Is it? Any more than it would be fair for Shirley to take yours. There are enough for both of you. Now suppose you put half of them in this box and give them back to sister."

"Won't."

Bobby clinched the matter by turning his back and clutching his box firmly in his lap.

Bruce appeared in the doorway. Nan explained the situation to him briefly, then dropped on her knees beside the stubborn boy.

"Please, Bob."

He stared at her angrily. Nan gathered herself for the battle, leaned close and looked at him quietly.

"Bob, dear. Listen. You aren't playing fair. If you don't play fair with the beads and buttons you can't play with them at all. Nan will take them away."

Bob's mouth became grim. Nan waited, then she said:

"Bobby, I'll give you a few moments to think about it. If you want to give Shirley her half you may do so, and keep yours. If you don't, Nan must take them all away from you."

She rose from her knees and went over to Bruce, who was still standing listening.

"Was that right?" she asked in a low tone.

He nodded.

"The time has come, I think, Mr. Wilson, for Bob and me to have it out. He has done this too often. It's not fair to Shirley. She's learning selfishness too, and it's spoiling a natural generosity

and sweetness in her. Bob is hurting them both. He must be made to see. Do you agree?"

Bruce nodded again, a troubled look in his eyes.

Nan went back to the boy.

"Are you ready to give Shirley her beads now, Bob?"

"Won't."

Nan leaned down and quickly loosened his hold on the box. Then she arose in time to avoid flying arms and legs. Bob had gone into one of his ungovernable rages.

Nan's face was set. She glanced at Bruce.

"Stay here till it's over," she said. "I want you to see for yourself."

For a half hour Bob was allowed to shriek. Bruce, Shirley and Nan retired to her screened porch where they watched the sun burst through the clouds in a welcoming blaze of light. Bruce made various suggestions; Nan made a few herself to which Bruce gave his approval. During the course of the next hour they were all tried and all failed. Nan, returning from a final disappointment, faced Bruce. Shirley was being given her supper by Agnes.

"Mr. Wilson," Nan said slowly, "there is nothing left to do but to try a whipping."

"No!"

"But he can't keep this up. Don't you see he

can't? He's begun striking his head now. Hear him. He will hurt himself. He hits the floor, wall, furniture—anything. It's his last resort and always weakens me. If I give in to him now,—return the beads,—what has he learned? How will he ever acquire self-control, the biggest lesson he has to learn in life? Let me try a whipping once. I only had to do it once to David."

But Bruce was firm.

"I don't believe in it. There must be another way. Give him more time, more love. You've made progress ——"

"But I slide two steps backward on an occasion like this, for the one I made forward."

They returned to the nursery. Bob, a wretched, writhing figure with purple face, wild eyes and gasping sobs was beating his head against the bed. Bruce spoke quickly.

"Give him the beads. He'll be in convulsions in a moment."

Nan shook her head.

"It's all wrong," she murmured, but she had to obey.

Such a defeat as this left her heartsick. Any successes she may have had shrivelled to nothing in the blackness of the despair that filled her. Bit by bit, with painstaking care, with endless patience and

hope and love she would build up in Bob what she believed was a foundation for self-control, only to see him dash it to the ground himself. And she was powerless to prevent it. Bruce kept her hands shackled. It wasn't fair. He had left the situation to her, he had said, but he hadn't.

A similar circumstance arose within the week. Bruce was not there but Nan reported it to him. Persistently, bravely, she made her request again. Would he release her from her promise not to whip the child? With some curtness he refused. Nan set her lips and left him silently. She would not quarrel. But couldn't he see? Why couldn't he see? Was he just stubborn?

Weeks of peace followed. Nan began to think perhaps Bruce was right after all. Then just as she was becoming at rest concerning Bob, his relations with her, and his relations with his father, a new trouble appeared on the horizon.

About the middle of October, one day while the children were taking their afternoon rest, Nan slipped down into the laundry to press a waist she had just finished making over. The laundry opened off the servants' dining-room and was reached either from this or through the outside entrance. Nan, not liking to disturb the servants, who were lingering over a late lunch, went through the kitchen and

came into the laundry from the outside. Through the closed door voices and laughter came to her. She paid no attention until her own name caught her ears, then, testing the electric iron with a wet finger and beginning her pressing she could not help but hear.

"I tell you 'tain't Miss Nan. Why should he worry about her for?" the cook's voice, loud in argument, rang through the partition.

"No, it hasn't nothing to do with Miss Nan," Agnes agreed in her soft gentle tone. "Him and her are as friendly as ever was since Shirley's birthday."

"An' 'tain't Bob," the cook continued, "is it, Agnes? Didn't you say yourself he was getting better all the time?"

"Yes," Agnes agreed again. "Land! We've had peace now for three weeks. She's just wonderful, that's what she is."

Nan hurried with her ironing. This was pleasant enough hearing but she believed in the old saying that listeners never heard good of themselves. She didn't want to wait for more.

"No, 'tain't Bob," the cook continued. "Now what *is* it, worryin' him sick, making him send back half his meals untouched? What you gotter say about it, you Perkins, you? Sitting up there like

you was in the company of the Boss himself. Bend your back and unhook your tongue."

Perkins's slow words came at last.

"Business. That's wot it is. Business. Did 'e hever 'ave men come to 'is den—two hand three hov 'em at once in han hevening before? I says not. An' did 'e hever sit hup hisself huntil hafter midnight, even when 'is wife's death was *new* to him? Hagain I says not. Business. That's just wot."

Nan was through. Disturbed, she clicked off the current, lifted the dainty waist in her hand and slipped out as she had come in. Up in her room she put away the waist and went out on her porch. Were the servants imagining or was Bruce really having troubles of some kind? To be sure he didn't play as much as he used to with the children, and she had heard voices and comings and goings in the evenings of late. But she and Miss Burton had believed the men were guests come for a game of billiards or a quiet smoke. They had nodded approval together and had hoped it would continue.

"Oh, I do hope it's nothing serious," Nan thought. "Just as I'm getting his life a little warmer—a little happier. I don't want miserable business to mix him up and keep him away from Bob. He's just getting such a beautiful start.

Why, Bob saves up things now, to tell him! It's too sweet."

That night when Bruce came to the nursery Nan watched him with the eagle eye that a mother keeps on her young. She was not going to let anything loosen Bruce's hold on his children. If there were business troubles, really troubles, then he should keep that much closer to them. She saw Bruce settle in the wing-chair by the window, saw the children race to his knees, saw the fine frown between his brows fade as contentment crept in and troubles crept out, and with a little sigh of relief she nodded wisely to herself.

"Can't be much or he wouldn't forget so quickly. Guess the servants just love gossip and the excitement of worry."

So she reassured herself.

After Bruce had gone Nan undressed the children and helped them to bed. As she went to the windows to fling them wide, she realized with a start of surprise that fall was upon them. The air that came in was cold.

"Clothes!" Nan's femininity shouted. "I haven't a thing for cool weather and neither have the children."

She stood a moment breathing in the cool air, then she turned back to her room.

"I'll take a day off!" she determined excitedly. "I'll leave Agnes in charge and I'll dash for little old New York and *buy*—not shop! I'll get me"—Nan drew a deep ecstatic breath—"a stunning suit—the price of which would have staggered me three months ago. I shall thrill but never bat an eye. And a cuddly fur piece. I'll get six pairs of silk stockings, a hat, a dozen hair nets all at once, a silk dress——"

Nan danced to her desk and furiously made out a list. The fun of it! Of buying without thinking! Nan wanted to envelop everyone she knew in her joy. Her list ended by looking this way:

1. Doll carriage for Shirley.
2. Her clothes.
3. Wheelbarrow for Bob.
4. His clothes.
5. Waist for Agnes.
6. Something for Mr. Wilson if I can think of it and dare.
7. Something for Betty's baby.
8. Ties for all the boys.
9. A sweater for Betty herself.
10. My things.
11. Double chocolate pecan sundae.
12. Movies—No, *real theatre,* if I have time.

"There now!" Nan sat back and surveyed the

list. "I guess that's all. Now I must go down and ask Br—Mr. Wilson if it's all right."

Eagerly she sped down the stairs and paused at the door of his den. Bruce, hearing her, looked up and instinctively smiled. Nan, in her green organdy frock was a-tiptoe, her arms stretched out on either side of the doorway, patently bursting with something unsaid.

"Do say it, Miss Nan." Bruce, rising, came forward.

Nan entered the room and stood before him.

"It's not a saying thing. It's an asking thing, Mr. Wilson. I want a day off. I want to leave the children and go to New York and—and—spend all my money," she finished, her eyes dancing.

"Of course," he agreed. "It's time you *did* take a vacation. You haven't left the children at all, since you've been here, have you?"

Nan shook her head.

"I haven't wanted to. I don't particularly now, but we all need clothes,—warmer ones."

In the hall Perkins was moving to the front door in answer to the bell.

"I should be glad to take you in the car with me, Miss Nan, if you can be ready by seven-thirty."

"Thank you so much. That will be splendid. Then I can get home early."

At the foot of the stairs Nan saw three men coming in. In the back of her mind hovered a vague consciousness of trouble, vague memories of servants' gossip, but these she brushed from her as she flew back to her room and settled down to the absorbing business of trimming a hat that would look decent to wear to the gay metropolis the next day.

Hats! Nan had worn one just twice that summer. Those times were on the occasions of her two trips with Bruce and the children. She smiled as she worked, fingers flying in and out, trying a bit of black here, a wee bow there ——

It was after eleven when Nan with a sigh stood up and tried on the hat before her mirror. It would do, but that was the best she could say about it. She stretched, yawned, laid the hat on her couch and stepped into the children's room for a last look to see if they were covered. Their door into the hall was unlatched and rattling. Nan went over to close it and found that the up-stairs light in the hall was still on. She slipped out, closing the door behind her, and moved quickly to the switch at the head of the stairs.

In the darkness she stood a moment, listening. Those three men must still be there. Voices floated up to her from Bruce's den. There was the sound

of a door opening, then the voices again, and Bruce's sounding above the others.

". . . like more time to consider your offer . . . within the month . . ."

She flew back down the hall as steps and voices drew closer, and shut herself into her room.

"Almost eleven-thirty!" she glanced at the clock. "Oh! There is something the matter. Men don't talk like that unless there is." Nan pressed her two hands together, and whispered impulsively to a Somebody she hoped was around: "If there *is* going to be any trouble, let me be here to help. Let me find a way. I've got to help him, same as I'd help Bob or Shirley. It's just—part of my business."

CHAPTER IX

NAN looked as fresh as a flower with the dew still on it when she took her seat beside Bruce Wilson in the limousine the next morning. Under her straight black hat her hair gleamed a shining gold, and her eyes, deep and sweet, smiled happily at a smiling world.

She had been a little troubled at leaving Bobby. One could never tell with him, what would happen. But he had promised to be good and Agnes was so tactful and capable—Nan, with a sigh, rolled cares off her heart. Nothing could possibly go wrong on a wonder-morning like this, anyway. The birds carolled it insistently, exuberatingly. The sky smiled it serenely. Nature was celebrating with Nan, rejoicing in her well-deserved holiday, and Bruce, glancing down at the slim little figure in her white satin sport skirt and thin black sweater, smiled in pleasure at her contentment.

"I wish I had found you ages ago," he said rather startlingly.

Nan looked up in surprise.

"For Bobby's sake. He would have been spared so much."

"That's very appreciative of you—and a great encouragement to me."

That ride was to be memorable for Bruce's sudden thrusting questions. He was for some reason digging deep, and managed in spite of his directness that brought the color to Nan's cheeks and laid any pretense bare, not to leave her feeling stripped, defenseless. Had she shown a disinclination to answer him, he would have left her in her privacy. But she, half-eager, half-shy, met him with a gladness unaccountable to her.

"Why didn't you trust me at first, Nan Carter?"

So Nan told him. Quite easily she went back to the beginning, filling in the outline she had sketched in his office, painting in the shadows, the black and gray shades of her past, that made the sunlight of her nature so much the brighter. She turned the years inside out for him, showed him the dinginess of days that were brightened only by the rainbow hope of her own fancy. Bruce neither moved nor spoke. And finally, she turned to him sweetly.

"And you made me see that I didn't hate at all. That I didn't really distrust—ever."

"I don't understand. How have I done that?"

Nan's clear eyes studied him a moment. Her laugh was light and frank.

"I don't know. I don't know what there is about you, but somehow I do know that you would never be a Mr. Ketcham. I knew it before I went to the

farm in New Jersey and heard that woman's story —I knew it—oh—ages before that. The night of Shirley's birthday."

Nan's honest eyes dropped for a moment. There was something very dear and precious in the memory of that revealing moment by the pool and she didn't want Bruce to see just yet how dear it was.

"If I've really done that I'm immensely proud and glad," he said. "One cannot do a much finer thing than restore a lost faith."

"Well, mine wasn't lost exactly because I never really had it." Nan lifted her face in time to see in Bruce's eyes that same look she had caught in his office. Pain—because something beautiful, precious, once possessed was lost. He recovered himself instantly.

"No, you haven't had the hurt of losing, and I'm happy you are having the joy of discovery—through me. Now tell me, Miss Nan, if you will, a little more about your father's failure. Being a business man, you've skipped over what seems to me the meatiest part. Your father was the owner of a silk company, you say?"

"Yes." Nan drew her brows together in thought. "I skipped over it because it's so vague to me. I was just nine and couldn't understand very well, you know, and Dad didn't talk about it much after-

ward. As I recall it, there was a consolidation of silk companies into a Trust ——"

"Yes," Bruce was listening intently.

"They asked Dad to join and he refused."

"Why?"

"He had a machine that he and another man had invented, a machine for finishing silk with a new lustre. They had spent years and years working on it, Mr. Wilson, and had just completed the thing to their satisfaction. I remember Ferguson almost lived at our house at times. John Ferguson was the real inventor, but Dad, because of his experience, had given innumerable practical suggestions all along and Dad was financing it. It was patented in Ferguson's name but they were both to share in the profits. There was a written agreement."

Bruce nodded. He was lighting a cigarette. Nan saw his face suddenly severe. Funny how just puffing on a cigarette could make a man look so grim.

"Well, I believe if he had joined the Trust it would have shared in the profits. It didn't seem fair to Dad. He didn't care so much for himself. He had plenty of money then. But he cared for John Ferguson who hadn't a cent and was the real inventor. He fought for John's sake, you see, although there was pride and selfishness in it too—

Dad always said so. They wanted to keep it to themselves. I don't blame them."

"No, of course not. So your father fought the Trust."

This was a statement more than a question.

Nan nodded.

"All the money he'd saved to put his machine on the market he had to sink into fighting the Trust. He fought for three years and—lost."

"What became of the machine?"

"It was never actually built. There were just the plans for it and the drawings ——"

"But those, child—those ——" At the impatience in his voice Nan glanced up startled. His eyes, keen and piercing, were fixed on her with a burning brightness. Nan drew back. She was hurt. He seemed to care, not so much for her father's loss and Ferguson's as the loss to the silk business of a machine that ought to be making money for someone. Perhaps for himself. A little of the old misgiving stirred suddenly in Nan's mind. She stiffened and lifted her head.

Bruce felt the doubt, saw Nan's disappointment and retreat and instantly he became himself again. The intense lines about his mouth disappeared and gentleness returned to his eyes.

"Wrong should always be righted," he said

quietly, "and your father and Ferguson were wronged. It set me wondering if something couldn't be done about it, even now."

Nan shook her head.

"I don't see how."

But she was reassured and comforted. Bruce was, as usual, thinking of others. What a mean, suspicious mind hers had become through the habit of years. Then her memory raced back and caught up a new thought she had not yet given Bruce.

"If a friend had been the friend he believed him to be, Dad would never have *been* wronged." Nan blazed it out. "Oh! For that I don't blame Mother for hating. If someone I trusted and liked failed me, I think I should hate too. Really hate. But you can't unless you suffer yourself."

"What do you mean by that—if a friend had been the friend he believed him to be?"

"Why, some man,—someone Dad knew quite well,—was the biggest stockholder in the new Trust. Through his influence he could have prevented the Trust from pushing Dad and his company to the wall."

"Do you know that?" Bruce's voice was quiet.

"Know what?"

"That he was the biggest stockholder and that he didn't oppose the policy which ruined your father?"

"As well as those things can be known. On the face of it, it looked as though he failed Dad. That cut him worse than anything, I think."

"It's not always fair to judge from appearances," Bruce suggested.

"Then why didn't he hunt Dad up later and tell him he was sorry? Explain? Or something?"

Bruce did not answer. His silence lasted a long while, through the lighting and finishing of another cigarette. Then he glanced at the girl beside him.

"Now you've told me all but one thing," he said gently.

Nan looked at him inquiringly.

"Where are the prints—the drawings?"

Nan hesitated. There was really no reason why she shouldn't answer. If she told him—not trusting him—what matter? John Ferguson was faithful to the core and Bruce could never get them from him. If she told him, trusting him,—what difference? The secret was safe, either way.

"Ferguson has them." Bruce suppressed a start that Nan did not see. "He was Dad's foreman and before Dad died he left everything pertaining to the machine to John. John swore on the Bible to Mother that he'd never let the papers go out of his hands until he could put the machine on the market himself. He's been working ever since, trying to

save up enough money to do it." A tender smile lit Nan's eyes. "Faithful old John. He'll never be able to do it. It takes thousands and thousands, doesn't it?" she queried.

Bruce nodded. His arms were folded across his chest, his eyes straight ahead.

"But it's his dream and he's happy dreaming it." Nan was still a second. "Dad always believed," she went on, "that some day his dream—and John's —would come true. That some day that machine would be doing just what he wanted it to do."

Still Bruce was silent.

"Having faith that your dreams will come true is the biggest part to making them, I think, don't you?"

At last Bruce answered her lightly, flinging the cigarette out of the car window.

"Oh, Luck has a lot to do with it. Luck or Fate or whatever you want to call it. Sometimes Fate has a way of—getting even." Then his tone changed. "Come, Miss Nan, tell me about all the beautifuls you are to buy to-day."

The subject was turned swiftly. Only once again on that ride did Bruce refer to her story.

"What was the name of the man whom you believed failed your father?" His gaze was curiously intent as he waited for her answer.

"Robert—something. I don't know the rest. He would never tell me."

"And where is this man Ferguson now, do you know?"

Nan shook her head.

"I haven't heard from him in two years. He used to keep us posted but he has rather neglected us lately. I expect one day, though, he'll turn up at Betty's, silent and devoted as usual."

A look of relief crept into Bruce's face, and the conversation shifted again.

"If you care to, Miss Nan, Parker can take you around to-day to the stores, and if you are kept busy as late as five-thirty, we can ride back together."

"Oh ——" Nan thought a moment. "I'd love to use the car to do my shopping. It will save loads of time and make me feel tremendously silk-lined and gilt-edged, besides. But if I do I shall get through and go home by train early. I want to be there for their supper, Mr. Wilson."

He nodded.

"Suit yourself, but know that Parker and the car are at your disposal. This is where I leave you." He turned squarely to her as the automobile slowed before his office building. "You are sure, are you,

that your man-hating tendency has disappeared for keeps?"

Half-jesting, half-earnest, he waited for an answer.

"Oh, quite. You removed it." Nan met jest with jest. "And no one but you could bring it back. Of course if you failed me ——"

"Your silence holds a dire threat. Let me know the worst."

Nan laughed gaily. "My imagination staggers here."

Bruce laughed with her but in his eyes was seriousness. "You must promise never to hate me, Miss Nan, always to trust me, will you?"

"No matter what?" she queried.

"No matter what," gravely.

"You ask a good deal. I'd be promising in the dark. How do I know what you may do?" Nan was teasing.

"Isn't trusting for just that? For dark places as well as light? For blindness as well as vision? Please give me your promise."

"Mercy!" Nan cried. "How solemn we've grown—over nothing at all. Of course I promise; at least I'll promise to *try*."

Bruce put out his hand, Nan's flew to meet it, and for a second, with her hand lying warm and

close in his strong clasp they were alone in the wilderness of a throng-filled city.

"Good-bye and thank you. I shan't forget," he said.

Nan watched his broad shoulders swing through the door. Then she shrugged and pulled out her shopping list. It was absorbing but the hour's conversation she had just had was absorbing too. Nan caught herself again and again from the foolish sweetness of recalling looks and words of Bruce's. Strangely enough, although suspicion of him had returned during that ride, it slipped away in her memory of it. She knew he had been startlingly queer at moments but nothing but his gentleness was clear to her. Finally she determinedly fixed her mind on her day's work and lost herself in the thrill of contemplated buying. A patient Parker was at last directed to Fifth Avenue.

On second sober thought, Nan abandoned the idea of buying a present for Mr. Wilson.

"It might look a little queer," she thought. "Isn't it odd how the simple things in life are always the most complicated? But there ——" a wee sigh of disappointment slipped out. "I'll get Miss Burton something instead."

The hours flew by and at three o'clock Nan had managed to squeeze in the full programme she had

mapped out except the theatre. She dismissed Parker at the station.

"The theatre," she said cheerfully, "must wait. It would be more fun to have company, anyway. Wouldn't I love to bring Agnes? Poor starved soul. She doesn't go anywhere or do anything. But of course I can't. I s'pose Miss Burton will be the one."

Nan, tired but happy, with her arms laden with bundles, stepped off the train at the trim, hedged little stone station and sank into a taxicab.

"Simply wonderful," she murmured, resting her head against the seat and closing her eyes. "Simply wonderful to have reached the affluent stage in life where I can buy half a dozen toys and ride in a taxi and never turn a hair. Wonder how my babies have been behaving?"

With the thought came an inexplicable little feeling of uneasiness. Nan suddenly sat upright, fancying a million disastrous accidents that could have occurred in her absence.

"Foolish of me," she gathered her bundles up, ready to spring from the car the moment they reached the big house. "Nothing of course *has* happened. I forgot to tell Agnes not to let them slide down the haymow. Shirley got such a bad bump yesterday. But then—I don't think she would

anyway. Agnes is awfully careful—and she's got good judgment ——"

The ride seemed endless. All the beauty of the day had gone for Nan as this nameless fear gripped her. She moved forward to the edge of the seat, tense, expectant, her money—the exact change—ready in her gloved hand.

"Ah! At last!"

Nan jumped out, thrust the money into the driver's hands and dashed across the verandah, into the wide hall.

For a second she stood still, breathlessly listening. Faintly there came to her ears a screaming. With her heart in her mouth she ran for the stairs dropping her bundles before the bewildered Perkins.

"Pick them up, Perkins, thank you," Nan called back. She could not wait to ask him what the trouble was, though she had seen him preparing in his stiff slow way to say something.

Up two steps at a time, down the long halls—Nan flew on wings. The screaming came louder and with it an incessant thumping, a familiar and sickening sound. She flung open the nursery door and sprang in.

Agnes was in a low chair undressing a wide-eyed, frightened little Shirley who sat motionless

watching Bobby. Agnes was crying and trembling, her hurrying fingers stumbling over buttons as she stripped Shirley, her eyes on the screaming boy.

For Bobby lay on his stomach on the rug, yelling at the top of his lungs, beating his feet and his head rhythmically on the floor.

"Bobby dear," Agnes alternately begged and scolded. "Don't, please! Get up!—You'll hurt yourself—stop it ——"

Nan stared. Then she plunged upon Bob and jerked him up to a standing position.

"Bob Wilson!" she commanded sternly. "Behave yourself!"

But Bobby was beside himself, uncontrolled and uncontrollable, in the worst paroxysm of rage Nan had ever seen. Gasping, he struggled free of Nan's little hands, rushed to the bay-window seat, slumped on the floor and flung his head back against the woodwork.

Nan looked questioningly at Agnes who had put Shirley in bed and was standing now, wringing her hands, her plain face distorted in helpless despair.

"Oh, Miss Nan!" she sobbed. "I'm so glad you've come! He's been going on like that for two hours now. I can't stop him. First it's the floor, then the wall, then the radiator—then he crawls to

the chairs and whacks them with his head—hard. You can see—I thought he'd split it open. And yelling like that all the time ——"

"What started him?" Nan was pulling off gloves and hat, concerned eyes on the convulsed little figure of the lad who was so stupidly and stubbornly hurting himself. She was not only afraid he would seriously injure himself but she was desperately afraid she would not know how—would not be able to control him again. She had never seen him quite so far gone as this.

"Don't know, ma'am." Agnes dried her tears. "I left them a minute and Shirley came running to tell me. I couldn't understand her. Then she got frightened—and I guess she's forgot by now."

Nan leaned over Shirley.

"Shirley dear," she said coaxingly, "tell Nan what made brother Bob angry. What did he want? What happened? Can you remember?"

But the tears only slid down the child's face as she shook her head. Nan straightened up, looked at Bob, then her face set in resolute lines.

"Get me the little whip, Agnes, the one he uses on his hobby horse." She spoke quietly but her voice was stern as Agnes had never heard it, her face quite white and her gray eyes black. With it in her hand she approached Bobby once again. For

a second she paused, then with a shake of her head she laid it swiftly down and dragged Bobby into her lap as she sank into a low rocker.

"Why, Bobby boy!" she murmured gently. "Bobby dear! Tell Nan what's the trouble ——"

Bobby's square solid figure stiffened and leaped in Nan's arms. His eyes rolled wildly—his breath came in terrible chunky noises. She could not hold him. He was again on the floor, crawling, purple and twitching to the radiator. Nan was really frightened.

"Why, Agnes, he acts—crazy," she whispered.

"Yes'm—oh, I know it,"—Agnes began crying again, "and he's been at it so long."

Nan drew a long breath, closed her lips firmly and picked up the whip. She stood over Bob, a stern, hard little figure and began mercilessly lashing his back as he crawled on the floor.

"Oh! Miss Carter! Don't!" Agnes cried. "Don't whip him! It always meant they had to go! Please."

But Nan, though conscious of the words, was deaf to the entreaty; the exigency of the moment —the need to control Bob was her whole concern. The means was immaterial and there was no alternative.

For a second the screaming ceased. Then Bobby

sprang upright and dashed to the wall, backing against it, his eyes blazing. Nan faced him, determined, with her steady gray eyes beating down Bob's defiance.

"Bob Wilson," she spoke slowly in the momentary pause, "if you hit your head once again I'll thrash you."

Bobby's mad glance shifted, then he opened his mouth and with yell after yell piercing the air, he flung his head back repeatedly against the wall.

"Help me hold him, Agnes."

Nan was white-lipped now and the two of them held Bob while Nan rained blow after blow on his heaving shoulders. The seconds seemed minutes, the minutes hours, but the whip came down steadily until the hysterical screams had ceased and a more natural broken cry came instead.

Then Nan laid down her whip and gathered the queer little lad in her arms.

"Tuck Shirley under the covers again, Agnes," she said quietly. "And take my things in my room. I'll manage now. Lie down, Shirley-girly, and go sleepy. Brother's all right now. Nan's going to rock him a while and then he'll go to bed too."

Through the sunset hour until dusk crept quietly into the room, Nan held the shaking boy, rocking gently and crooning soft lullabies. His little body

shuddered less and less until at last he rested quietly in Nan's arms, white and downcast. Then Nan pressed her face against his tumbled black hair and stopped her rocking. Bobby never moved.

"Bobby-boy," Nan whispered, "sit up and let Nan slip off your hotty-hot clothes."

Bob, still silent, still with lowered eyes, obeyed. Nan softly pulled off the damp little pieces and slipped on his cool clean pajamas. Then she carried him to the bathroom and bathed his streaked face and dirty hands, brushed his hair back from his forehead and with him still in her arms went swiftly to his little bed beside Shirley's.

Silently she laid him down, drew the covers over his still little figure and pinned them tight. Bobby never once raised his eyes and Nan, sick at heart, with a great lump in her throat, choking her, laid a soft hand on his face and turned away. At the door of his room she paused and looked back. Shirley was asleep but Bob's grave dark eyes met hers. In them was all the hurt and wonder and pleading that his baby soul was feeling. Swiftly Nan returned to his bed and knelt down, putting both arms around him.

"Oh, Bobby-boy," she murmured. "Bob darling—Nan loves you so."

The grave eyes still regarded Nan's gray ones

and the look in them nearly broke her heart. They were measuring, weighing. If they finally repelled her, her weeks of good work and this night of agony were gone for naught. She would have lost Bob forever. She took the limp little hands, praying for wisdom.

"Bob, listen," she explained slowly. "Nan hated to hurt Bob. Nan hated it so! But Nan had to. Bob dear, you are a little machine—just like an automobile, and your mind is the steering wheel. When you keep your mind on yourself—on your body—you can steer it where you want it to go. You can make it start or stop or turn around. Your mind can make your body stay in the road. But when you take your mind off your body it's like taking your hands off the steering wheel. Do you remember? You did it that day Daddy let you help him drive—the day we went sailing. You took your hands off without stopping the car or telling Dad and we nearly went in the ditch. Well, to-day, you took your mind off yourself and *you* went into the ditch. You didn't know what you were doing, Bob, and Nan had to make you find out. Nan had to help you get hold of your steering wheel again."

Nan paused, then she gave him her most impelling smile and gathered the little hands tighter.

"But I do believe, Bob, that you'll never let go

of your steering wheel again. I do believe you've done it for the last time. I do believe you're big enough now to run yourself alone." She waited, then swiftly:

"Big enough, Bob?"

"Yes."

The little word came with Bobby's old quaint deliberation.

"Yes, I am. You aren't ever going to whip me again."

"No, because Bob's never going to let go of the wheel again, are you?"

"No."

Nan leaned closer and kissed the serious little face.

"Good-night, dear—Nan's big boy."

Bobby sighed gently, tucked one hand under his head and said sweetly:

"Good-night, Nan."

A Waterloo without defeat for either side. For Nan had won victory over Bob and Bob had dug out of the ruins a vision of victory for himself.

In her room Nan flung herself on her bed. She cried a little and laughed a little and after a while she grew very, very still. She was remembering. She had promised Bruce Wilson ages ago—how many ages it seemed—that she would never lift a

hand against Bob. In the terrible emergency she had broken her promise, and in her relief over the results she had not recalled it. But now realization came stinging hard. She had whipped Bob cruelly. She had failed a trust, and Bruce must know.

Nan's suffering for the next two hours was acute, made more so by her feeling of helplessness. How was she ever to make Bruce see that it was the only thing she could do? He hadn't been there. And he was adamant in his belief about corporal punishment. Nan recalled now his words and looks and voice as he had sat in his office that day of the interview, and the two other times she had brought the subject up. And as memory awakened Nan's heart sank lower and lower.

She walked about through her rooms and out onto the porch.

"I have succeeded with Bob—and he will think I have failed. He will never understand." Nan's thoughts stabbed to her heart with fresh pain. "This is the end of everything and it should rightly be just the beginning."

The end of Bob's sweet growth. For someone else would come who didn't love and couldn't understand. The end of seeing Shirley! The end of knowing Bruce—ah, and that was just at its be-

ginning. The end of comfort and beauty and loving service.

Her little hands were wrung together, and her eyes closed in her pale face. Then they flew open and stared widely, darkly ahead at the future.

"He's got to know. There's no question about that. And I've got to tell him now, to-night, right away. There's no question about *that.*" Nan set her lips and went back to her bedroom.

Her dinner tray was brought and Nan waved it away. She spent that hour dressing herself. Without knowing what she chose she picked out a gray silk dress that matched her eyes. It was cut in severely simple lines and added a few years to her girlishness. Then, with her eyes on the clock she sat down and waited.

Bruce would be through his meal by quarter of eight surely. Until then she must think what to say —how to approach him ——

But Nan's mind refused to work. Worn out with her struggle with Bob and with the aftermath of bitter realization that her act had its consequences to be faced, all thought ceased. She was conscious of only one sensation—dread. Her eyes were dark and big in a face suddenly small and white and they watched without winking the creeping pace of the hands on the clock.

It was twenty minutes of eight when something broke loose in Nan. She jumped up, breathing hard, and a second later a small figure was slipping like a gray ghost down the stairs to Bruce Wilson's den.

CHAPTER X

At the foot of the stairs Nan paused, a hand at her white throat where a tiny pulse was beating wildly. She must regain her breath, her composure before meeting Bruce. She must be cool and assured, for any appearance of fright would be a tacit admission of wrong committed. Nan slipped an arm about the newel post and clung there on the lowest step until the hard hammering of her heart ceased. Then with the seconds slipping by she stood yet longer trying to marshal her thoughts in some order. Up-stairs, during that dreadful hour of waiting, she had been unable. But now, at the last moment, her brain cleared.

Before her the house lay in a profound quiet, and as on that first night of her arrival, its beauty left a chill impression. A house without a soul, Nan thought, and there leaped to her mind another thought—a man without a heart. Was Bruce?

Would Bruce overlook all she had accomplished and adhere sternly to a course of conduct he had laid down in accordance with his beliefs? Was he iron bound by those? Could Nan shake him from them? Or would he be gentle, tolerant, quiet,—as she had seen him with the children, with the old woman at the farm, with the servants?

Before her eyes flashed a picture of Bruce facing her across his desk at his office. His tones rang in her ears, steely, uncompromising. His face was set in determined lines. There came another,—Bruce lighting a cigarette, his profile from the high cheek-bone down to his chin, hard, unrelenting. And another,—Bruce beside her in the automobile, his eyes piercing, his voice harsh with impatience. This was Bruce. Or was Bruce the other man she knew, —the one with the tender smile and eyes of kindness? Nan shivered and did not know.

"It always meant they had to go." Agnes' words with an unspoken thought left in the air.

Nan became aware suddenly of an exterior influence pressing on her consciousness. She looked up and about her, jerked suddenly from her thoughts. The stillness of the great house seemed a menace. In the big hall and vast rooms on either side not a sound was to be heard, not a clock, nor a whispered breath, nor a footstep. The hush spread about her, clutching her with cold fingers, an oppressive haunting thing. Then to Nan's strained and listening ears came a soft thudding sound, a sound as of ghostly footsteps passing by.

Nan turned her head. The footsteps were marching down the stairs past her, and were lost in the stillness beyond by the great front door. They

were the footsteps of those other women who had come as she had come, had served as she had served and had gone as she would go.

The slurred footsteps ceased and then, because Nan's ears were attuned to fantastic noises, there came out of the silence of the beautiful still rooms the sound of fairy laughter. Not tinkling, silvery laughter this time, but shrill, discordant voices with a jeering note of triumph ringing high.

"Ha! Ha!" the Hard Luck Fairies cried. "Thought you were rid of us, didn't you? Thought you had a dream worth while! Thought it was coming true and all you had to do was live and laugh. Ha! Ha! Well, listen, Nan Carter. It never will come true because *you've left out the most important part of your dream!*"

And Nan, whose eyes were wide and deep with dreaming, Nan of the believing heart, gripped the newel post with both hands and waited for more, then she suddenly flung up her head.

"My foolish imagination. It'll gallop off with me some day."

With clenched hands at her sides she spoke aloud.

"Those other women may have made mistakes but I haven't. I know I was right. There was nothing else to do but whip Bob. I'll *make* Bruce believe it."

The other thought, that the fairies had left with her last, she tucked back in a wee cobwebby corner in the attic part of her brain. It wasn't important.

At the door of Bruce's den, Nan paused again. But this time it was not thoughts of herself that checked her. For Bruce sat in a deep chair, bent forward, his elbows on his knees and his mind turned inside out on his face. Nan could not surprise him with that expression bared to her eyes. Never in the world would he want her to see what she saw. Trouble, anxiety—yes—but the searing that bitter memories bring and the pain that hopeless longing leaves. Nan drew back in the shadows.

The rustle of her dress brought him to his feet and the ring in his voice shattered her composure.

"You!"

Dumbly, Nan let him draw her into the room, let him exclaim over her white, tired appearance, over her cold hands, over her foolishness in trying to cram so much shopping into one day, over her nonsensical conscientiousness in dismissing Parker and taking that long ride home in the crowded trains.

Nan dropped in the big chair he pulled forward and, still in silence, watched him light a fire that was laid ready to blaze. The night was cold and the furnace was not yet started.

"Have you wood in your room, Miss Nan?" Bruce was on one knee, pushing and pulling the logs about until the sparks rushed upward in a frenzy.

"Plenty, thank you."

"We'll have John start the furnace fire to-morrow. The house is getting damp and gloomy. There! That's better."

Nan suddenly sat forward, her knuckles showing white as she clasped her knees.

"I wish you'd sit down, right there, and stop being so kind and happy," she said.

"What's the matter?" There was instant concern in Bruce's voice. He dropped in the chair she indicated and leaned forward. Nan steadied herself, fighting back tears that threatened to deluge her.

"I've broken a promise to you, Mr. Wilson." In her effort to control her voice it was hard. "I've whipped Bobby."

There was a dead silence for a second. Then, as realization came, Bruce's face set, his eyes narrowed and blazed with anger. Nan met him with a level-eyed regard. His battling attitude cooled her as his consideration had upset her. She would say no more unless he asked for it. If he was the sort who condemned without a hearing then she

could take her punishment without a sound. She would no more ask for a chance to explain than, given it and proved guilty, she would ask for mercy.

For a long minute their looks held, Nan's gray gaze steady and cool before the hot one of the man before her. Then Bruce drew a long breath, rose and stood by the mantelpiece. With fingers that trembled he picked up his pipe and held it.

"Tell me how it happened, please," he said curtly.

Without moving, with her direct gaze still on him, Nan told him. The story held the facts, stuck grimly to the truth and stopped when Nan had won Bob back to quiet in her arms. But because Nan was proud, hurt by his instant antagonism, and terribly afraid of losing her control, it was a colorless tale. She would not say one thing that might seem to appeal for forgiveness. She would give the story to him honestly and leave him to judge. He had his memories of her behavior with the children.

When she had finished she dropped her eyes to her hands and waited. The fire crackled and blazed in merry unconcern over the fate that hung in the balance in the room.

"I am more than sorry this has happened," Bruce began at last, in a cold, quiet voice. "If you had

been here I doubt if it would have. That holds no rebuke, however. Please understand that."

Nan shrugged.

"Perhaps it wouldn't have happened to-day, but it was bound to come; you remember I warned you."

"Possibly," Bruce felt his way. "Possibly if you hadn't come home tired, you wouldn't have found it necessary to strike so soon. Weariness and impatience go hand in hand."

Nan's quiet look scorched.

"I did not strike Bob in anger. I knew what I was doing."

"You did not strike in anger, you say. You struck deliberately, calculatingly, knowing my feeling in the matter, cognizant of the fact that you had given a promise and were breaking it."

Nan made no answer.

"You remember I told you the effect that whippings had on Bob. They stiffen his spirit, increase his rebellion. They don't bend it. You remember, Miss Carter?"

"Yes."

Still Nan would not look up. If she had, if she had seen the misery in the man's eyes, his aching desire for some explanation she would have given it. Finally his voice came again, cold. "I can't understand your action, Miss Carter. It goes con-

trary to all I have seen of you. Can you justify it to any degree?"

Nan jumped to her feet.

"Please dismiss me and have it over with," she cried. Her cheeks were blazing now, her eyes black. "Or shall I tender my resignation?"

They faced each other, the man grim, the girl quivering with defiance, pride and a hurt that had gone deep. She steadied a trembling lip between her teeth, and refused to wink back bright tears. Bruce turned away quietly.

"Sit down, Miss Carter. You are running ahead —jumping to conclusions. We haven't talked this thing out yet."

"There's nothing more to be said."

"Pardon me. There's a great deal more to be said. I haven't finished and you have left a question unanswered."

Gently but firmly Bruce took her by the shoulder and pushed her back in her chair. Nan wished he wouldn't. His kindness was too upsetting. Still it was kindness,—just what she had hoped for. And he was showing open-mindedness, although he was sticking as determinedly to his beliefs as she was to hers. He was as earnest and honest in his conviction that she was wrong as she was that she was right. But he was giving her a chance to con-

vince him, making her take it, in fact. It was splendidly fair. She must meet him as fairly.

"You asked me ——?"

"Why you decided to whip Bob? What brought you to your decision if it wasn't a hasty one made in anger or out of weariness?"

"Why, Mr. Wilson, haven't I made you understand? Bob was nearly in convulsions. We none of us knew what he wanted. If I had, I should probably have given in to him as before. But I didn't know anything except that I was terribly afraid."

Her voice deepened. Bruce waited.

"I didn't see any alternative. He had to be stopped. There was no time to think whether I was right or wrong. Don't you see?" Bruce was still on his feet, his back to the fire. He began lighting his pipe slowly.

"And can you tell me what effect you think this whipping has had? Could you see that it brought any results other than a temporary control? What I mean is this—how many more times do you think it will be necessary to whip Bob before you can teach him that those tempers of his are useless and harmful?"

A smile flitted over Nan's face. It was like sunlight on frost.

"Bob has had his last temper, I do truly believe, Mr. Wilson," she said. "He knows *now* how wrong it is."

"How do you know?"

"He told me so."

Bruce lit his pipe, blew a great cloud of smoke in the air, then looked down at Nan. Back in his face again was the dear familiar look of kindness and gentleness and his voice was tender as he smilingly spoke.

"You didn't half tell your story. And you nearly ran off with the best of it unsaid. What happened, Miss Nan, after you rocked Bob to quiet in your arms?"

"I washed him and undressed him and put him to bed." Wilson's memory colored the succinct recital. He nodded. "And then I whispered good-night and got to my door. Then I looked back and there was Bob staring at me ——"

Nan's eyes filled with tears. She brushed them impatiently away.

"So I went back and we made up," she ended simply.

"That must have been a sweet moment."

Nan flashed him a surprised glance. He sensed then the tragedy of punishment, the ecstasy of reconciliation.

"It was precious," she said softly. "I"—she sent him the straight sweet look that was so appealing—"I prayed for wisdom. Moments for making havoc or creating strength and beauty are so short. I didn't want to make a mistake. There's a lot of praying in this mother business and a lot of banking on luck. And then you—go it blind. You never know till babies are grown up whether you've been right or not. It's a long time to wait. But tonight—well, God didn't keep me waiting so long."

Nan's voice—sweet, tender, musing, played on the strings of the man's heart. He stared at her as though he were seeing something unreal. Nan, with eyes on the blaze, went on. She told him, almost word for word, what she had told Bob, and without realizing it she made her appeal as strongly to the man as she had to the boy. She was living over again the tenseness of that time when the making of Bob rested for a wonderful moment entirely with her.

When she had finished she looked up gravely. Bruce held out both hands and Nan with amazement and bewilderment in her face, rose and laid hers in them.

"You—little mother," he said. Then he stopped. The color swept slowly up into Nan's face under Bruce's long look, and her honest gaze

dropped before the warmth of his. She drew her hands away slowly.

"Then—I'm not to go?"

He shook his head.

"No, you are not to go. Not until you choose to yourself. I've hunted too many years for a woman like you to let you go now easily."

"But I broke a promise."

"Which I had no right to exact. I should have trusted you. You told me so that day in the office. I do now. I leave Bob to you in the future with a serene mind. You have more wisdom than I in your management of him."

"More love than wisdom, Mr. Wilson."

His defeat was complete and he was crowning her with laurels. Nan should have felt elation but she was aware only of a great weariness. She turned to go. The tears that she had held back so long were crowding again. She wanted to get to her rooms and have the relief of a cry.

"I wish you'd stay."

The tone as much as the words turned Nan about again. Here was need calling to her, for—she did not know what. She saw Bruce again as she had glimpsed him that moment before entering the room and she came back swiftly and stood before him.

"I was sorry to add to your troubles to-night. I know you are having others."

Bruce made no answer as he pulled another deep leather-cushioned chair forward, and the two of them sat for a moment in silence. The fire had fallen to a sleepy, creepy flame. There was brooding in the room a spirit of sweetness, of understanding, of comradeliness. Nan's head dropped back against the chair, and she snuggled herself against the wide arm.

"Do you mind staying? You're so tired."

"Mind! Oh, no, I love it."

Then impulsively Nan stretched out a warm little hand and laid it on Bruce's arm.

"What is it? Didn't you call me back to tell me? I can't stand seeing trouble on your face and being kept out of it. I haven't much of a head for business but just talking helps sometimes."

She gave a little pat to the arm that lay under her hand, then drew it swiftly away.

Bruce started to speak, stopped, then started again.

"I'd like to, Miss Nan. I'd like to tell you all about it. I am having troubles, of various kinds, but—I can't tell you yet. Will you just believe that I will when I can,—as soon as I can? And will you believe too, that the knowledge of your interest and

sympathy—and faith"—he paused, "is a sustaining hand to a man in deep water?"

"If I could ever help, you'd let me?"

"Yes."

"Promise?"

"Yes."

There in the firelit room a sense of security as to Nan's future stole over her. She was sure now as she had never been before, that with Bruce giving her such complete trust, and with a clear understanding between them, nothing could so upset them again. She was here for keeps and no padding footsteps or fairy laughter would ever again frighten her. She laughed aloud at her recollection of those moments in the great still hall, and when Bruce asked her the reason she told him.

"I was foolish," she said frankly.

"You are imaginative but you are brave."

"Brave! But there wasn't any bravery about it. There was nothing else to be done. Honorable, perhaps, but not brave."

She might have kept silence, however, an honorable silence. He watched her narrowly as he said this. She might have pledged Agnes to secrecy. Then when weeks or months had proved her right, she could have come to him in triumph.

Nan's eyes flashed scornfully. But that wasn't

right. It was deceitful. No, she wasn't made like that. She had to play square, above all things.

But there was a right in it, he argued, leaning toward her. Let him tell her. She was taking a chance, when she came to him, taking a chance of his anger, her dismissal. If she believed she had done right, she should not have run the risk of Bob's losing her. It wasn't fair to him. Supposing he hadn't understood.

"I know. I thought of all that. But for me—there was simply no question. What would you have thought of me if I had done as you suggest?" she questioned suddenly.

He was silent at that, then answered slowly:

"I think, I really think I would have thought just the same of you as I do now."

"No!" Nan cried. He would in his secret heart have thought her cowardly. He'd despise her for it. She would despise herself. A queer light came into his eyes. He shrugged his shoulders.

"We have to agree to disagree very often, don't we?" he smiled.

It was almost midnight when Nan suddenly jumped to her feet.

"I had no idea so much time had gone. Where did it go to anyway? I'm sure it hasn't been half an hour since I started to leave."

Bruce held out his hand.

"I appreciate your staying. You've driven off my Hard Luck Fairies for an evening."

"Do they hoot around often?"

"Pretty often these days."

His voice was tired. Nan pressed his hand and murmured softly, "I'm sorry; good-night."

"Good-night, Miss Nan."

It was a matter of moments only for Nan to slip off her clothes and creep into bed. But it was a matter of hours before she could close her eyes and stop her mind from racing. What was the matter with her? Was it excitement or sheer weariness that kept her eyes wide in the darkness? It wasn't weariness, for she felt as light as a feather and all rested inside her. It was such a relief to know that the real Bruce was not the grim, unrelenting man she had seen occasionally, but a fair-minded, tender-hearted, kind friend. He would always be that to her now—always. For there was nothing that could possibly come between them. She was glad she liked him, and she did like him tremendously. She only wished he'd let her share his troubles. She wanted to be in on them, wanted to worry with him. She wasn't the kind of friend who could just share sunshine and laughter. She wanted to share—everything.

And then Nan's cheeks flamed so that she pulled the sheets up to cool them and she resolutely shut her eyes to herself and decided she had thought long enough. With everything settled and everybody happy there was no sense in staying awake—wishing for troubles. That's what she was doing.

CHAPTER XI

The fairies had apparently succeeded in collecting a multitude of colors, for October burst upon the scene in a riot of extravagant glowing tints. The woods were afire for days and the splendor of nature's last effort to give warmth to a shivering world was inspiring. It was a month of jubilant exhilaration for Nan such as she never remembered experiencing. On days such as these nothing on earth could go wrong. God was surely in His heaven—approving vastly.

Nan forgot she was a big sister and became a little one, almost as little a person as Bob. But in spite of her drops to the level of childhood, her hold over the boy was now firmly established and unquestioned. Bob adored Nan and obeyed her implicitly. She found this new attitude of his sweet and at the same time a bit pathetic. However, it was part of his development. So, the need for sternness gone and with Bruce's eye less and less upon her—his affairs were still needing a constantly guiding hand, it seemed—she flung herself into the business of playing with the children with the same earnestness she had given to the business of loving them. In her gray-blue sport suit, with an orange scarf and cap daring the leaves to do better, she

was a vivid and arresting figure as she romped with Bob and Shirley in the heaped-up leaves that were raked especially for their joy in scattering.

They played house. Each had his own special pile, and each dug a door, made a "nesty" room and took turns entertaining the other two. They played Old Witch and spread the leaves into weird and fantastic cobwebby prisons where Nan, always the realistic wicked witch, fiercely guarded a prisoner—usually Shirley—whom Bob sometimes excitingly managed to free. They buried treasures in the deeps of the dusty, dried leaves and thrilled or despaired in the search for it. And finally one snappy evening in November when a tempestuous wind had wooed the last bright leaves from the tree tops, they had stood in the swift falling darkness and had set the bonfires themselves. Nan's cap and hair had caught all the gold from the flames, her scarf was twisted about her neck below glowing cheeks, her skirt was whipped back by a stiff breeze, and she was standing, head upflung, revelling in the tang of the air, the snap and crackle and smell of the burning brush, the fearless rush of sparks to the heavens.

Out of the shadows behind her came Bruce. She looked, he was thinking, like a sprite herself, a saucy sprite who, if she cared to, might ride off

on her rake in the wind, should she not choose to play with him.

But before he reached her there was a cry from Bob, who stood as if paralyzed with pointing finger, and the two grown-ups saw Shirley racing toward them, a white face and frightened brown eyes straining away from little bright curling flames that leaped up over her shoulders.

In a second she was safe. The coat was on the ground, the red tongues of flame stamped out. Shirley, still white, was shaking in Nan's arms and Nan and Bruce on their knees with Shirley between them, stared with a silent solemn thankfulness at each other.

"Not hurt a bit." Nan's reassuring voice trembled as she made a swift examination.

Bruce passed his hands over his little girl. They met Nan's and even in that moment that had held such awful terror, she was conscious of a quick, warm thrill at his touch.

Shirley, an imaginative child always, kept fear with her. She began to whimper. Her eyes were fright-filled even after the return to the nursery and the telling of bedtime stories. In order to distract her, Nan suggested to Bruce that they take a long-talked of trip to the Natural Museum the following day. It would be Wednesday. Surely Bruce could

take a half day after all these strenuous weeks of devotion to work.

It was settled they should go and Bob's eager questions served to swerve his little sister's mind from herself. So, before a blazing fire with Shirley held tenderly close in his arms, and Bob an eager listener close at his elbow, Bruce tried to tell them some of the many sights they would see on the morrow. Nan, moving silently about the room, picking up fallen clothes, sent sidelong approving glances at the group before the wide hearth. How more than well her effort to unite Bruce and his children in understanding and love had repaid her. No matter now how long he was absent from the nursery, when he came back it was always with assurance, with the restfulness of going on where he had left off. No longer were there the agonizing efforts to begin. He was waited for and welcomed.

"We are to come to your office then at three," Nan said when prayers were done. "Parker will bring us?"

"Yes. I shall be waiting for you."

"It was a fortunate thought." Nan cast a slanting look at Shirley who tucked in her bed was serenely chattering of anticipated pleasures.

"Yes. It did the trick. And I've promised it to them for a long time. I'm glad to get at it. I'm

rather curious to see their reaction." He held out a warm, strong hand. "Good-night, Miss Nan."

"Good-night."

"How quick you were."

"I! You were there before me."

He smiled down at her.

"It's not a thing to quarrel about—just a thing to be immensely thankful about."

"That beautiful baby face—I was so frightened," Nan murmured.

Bruce was still holding Nan's hand. In his eyes was the dear gentleness she so loved to see.

"And to-morrow. The *first* thing we'll go to look at ——" he began, in a comforting tone.

Nan laughed and pulled her hand away.

"I'm all right."

"But you mustn't think about it any more. It's all over—well over."

"Yes, I know." There was a mistiness in Nan's wide eyes. "I shan't be silly. Good-night."

A gray day, decisively insisting that winter was upon them; a hint of snow in the thick, slow moving clouds; a still secretive bite in the heavy air. Nan buttoned Shirley's coat up close about her neck and wished she had slipped on a little sweater underneath. It was going to be cold and Shirley was sneezing. Thank goodness the car was closed

and they wouldn't be out much. The children had been so well all the fall, she had wanted to make it a record winter with no colds.

"I'll just dose her up when we get home," Nan decided with an anxious eye on the unconscious Shirley.

But the dose was forgotten in the fun of hearing the day talked over. Shirley had shivered away from the stuffed birds, which, for all their likeness to life, she insisted were "all b'woke." It was her way of saying dead. Bob had silently and absorbedly moved from one room to another storing up his impressions in the safety of his mind. Nan was sorry Bruce had been kept in his den on their return, by one of those annoyingly persistent business men. If he could only have followed them to the nursery he would have gotten what he wanted, what she herself was so much enjoying—Bob's slow thoughtful comments on a new experience. His questions were intelligent, extremely so, and Nan had a sudden awed and wondering glimpse of a quickening mind.

"Now, children dears, listen to Nan. You mustn't talk any more. No, not a teeny bit. It's frightfully late for little folks and the Sandman wants to finish his job and go to bed himself. So hushabye."

Nan slipped out of the room and into hers. Several returns for admonishing reminders were necessary, but finally there was a silence in the nursery and Nan, after a hastily scribbled note to Betty, made herself ready for bed, with a tired sigh. She dropped instantly into a deep and dreamless sleep and had been asleep she did not know how long when she suddenly wakened.

"How queer," she was sitting up in the darkness, her heart knocking hard and fast. "I know I heard something. I must have."

It came again. A short hoarse sound like the bark of a dog. Nan was out of bed in an instant, flinging a soft warm wrapper of blue about her, thrusting her feet into blue slippers and ringing for Agnes.

The low light, switched on in the nursery, revealed Bob sitting up in bed, staring in frightened sleepiness at Shirley. She was in a paroxysm of coughing, those fearful hard barks that sent fright to Nan's heart.

She shut the window, poked ineffectively at a few embers on the hearth, and turned back to the struggling child in the bed.

"Stay still, Bob," her voice over her shoulder was quiet, commanding. "Stay under the covers.

It's cold in the room. Nan will take care of Shirley."

Agnes appeared, an unlovely vision. Nan flung orders at her as she gathered a gasping, frightened, fighting Shirley into her arms and wrapped her about with an eider-down blanket.

"Find some ipecac—in the medicine closet in the bathroom. And a teaspoon. Shirley has the croup."

Agnes disappeared. Nan's gaze searched Shirley's face. Another strangling spell was coming. In the midst of it Agnes returned, pulling her dingy gray wrapper about her as her eyes fell on Bruce entering.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

"Croup." Nan was brief, her look still bent on Shirley, her hand held out to Agnes for the bottle. "One teaspoon, Agnes."

"There is none, Miss Carter."

Nan caught back a cry, flashed a look at Bruce, saw he was still dressed and said instantly:

"Get your car. Drive as fast as you can to the drug-store. Wake them up. Get me a bottle of ipecac. Shirley has the croup—real thing. *Hurry.*"

Awful moments followed, moments that covered several eternities. Agnes replenished the fire and

started the croup kettle burning while Nan held the agonized child. Each fearful attack lasted longer and left her weaker, and Nan, with eyes on a white, still face, strained her ears for the sound of a motor humming back under the window.

"Miss Nan! ain't it awful?"

"Hush." Nan was stern, remembering the silent frightened boy in the bed whose white face and black eyes gleamed fitfully in the back of her consciousness. "Has she never had this before?"

"No'm, not that I know of. And she was all right when she went to bed."

"It always comes that way, swift as death in the night. Let me try rubbing her chest. It won't do any good but it's doing something. Then go to the window, Agnes, and listen."

Shirley burst suddenly into another tearing cough, struggled frantically for breath, flinging the comforter to the floor and finally sinking back in Nan's arms with her beautiful brown eyes rolled up till only the whites showed and her forehead broken out in a cold sweat. Only for a second. Another paroxysm followed close and Nan, her breath coming with low, sobbing noises, prayed as she had never prayed before. Shirley fell into a limpness as still as death itself, only to struggle out again as the motor buzzed by under the window.

Almost instantly Bruce was in the room on his knees by Nan, measuring out with a steady hand the teaspoon of ipecac that he held until the exhausted child stopped her coughing. Then, quickly, with Nan holding the rolling head, he poured it down her throat.

"Another."

The fire was the only moving thing in the room. It leaped and danced, a lively merry soul, bent on cheer and comfort. It sent long black shadows racing up and down the walls, set little ones to bobbing on the ceiling, cast a rosiness over the three marble figures grouped close to it.

Bruce was still on his knees, his eyes like Nan's, glued on the waxen face of the little girl. The lids lifted, Shirley stirred, rose to another fight for breath and fell back again.

Bruce looked at Nan. Her braid of gold hair had fallen over her shoulder. Unaware of her movement she flung it back out of the way. Her blue eyes were black, fixed on Shirley's face.

"Can't we do more than this?" the man whispered.

"Another teaspoon while she's quiet."

Bruce measured it out, Shirley swallowed bravely, lay for a few moments longer, then was seized again. But this time there was relief. The medicine had

done its work, and the phlegm that had nearly choked the child to death came up in thick clots.

"Thank heaven." Nan's little whisper held a tremble. Her eyes relieved and reassuring met Bruce's anxious ones for a swift second. "The worst is over now. There's no more danger."

It was only a half hour later that Shirley was laid back in her little bed, exhausted, white but breathing naturally again. Agnes was dismissed and Bob was half asleep in his bed. Bruce turned from piling a couple of new logs on the fire to see Nan on her knees by the little bed that held Shirley, her head on her folded arms.

Bruce was at her side in an instant lifting her with strength and comfort in his touch.

"Child!"

He stared with a shock of dismay and amazement at a Nan whose gay brightness was crumpled, whose calm courage was melted into tears.

"I know." Nan dabbed at her eyes with the handkerchief he gave her. "I'm silly—when everything's all right," she glanced at Shirley who had closed weary eyes, "but twice in two days ——"

She flung up her head, steadied herself and smiled bravely.

"She's as dear to me as the other—even if I haven't worked and worried and fought with her.

I didn't know, you see, till to-night. What time is it?" she asked suddenly.

"Half-past one."

"And you haven't been to bed?"

He shook his head.

"I was finishing a little writing when I heard the excitement here and came up."

Nan looked at him and suddenly saw care carved in his face. There was no explaining the contraction of her heart as she perceived the weary lines about the kind eyes and the straight, steady mouth, but she suddenly laid a hand on his arm.

"Please go now—at once. There's no need to worry any longer. I shall hear the slightest sound and will call you if I need you."

Bruce's face lifted a moment from its look of strain and in that moment Nan's hand was carried swiftly and gently to his cheek. Then he was gone, but there went with him a vision that he took back to his room, a vision that kept getting between him and his pen as he strove to finish the business that should be done to-night; a vision of a slim, wide-eyed girl, with a blue dressing-gown as deep as her eyes holding her sweetness, hair splashing gold against a white throat, and a look of divine tenderness on her uplifted face.

An hour moved by; another started and had half

crept on its course when Bruce looked up suddenly, peered into the soft darkness beyond the circle of light on his desk and wondered if his mind or his eyes were playing tricks.

For there stood Nan, slim, wide-eyed, tender—and a little frightened. In her blue wrapper with her hair splashing gold down it over her shoulder, she moved timidly toward him.

"Didn't I tell you—ages ago—to go to bed?" she asked. Then suddenly—"Oh, Bruce, what *is* it?"

Bruce was on his feet staring down at her, still unbelieving.

"I went to look at Shirley. She was sleeping beautifully, but it was so hot in the room I thought I'd open the door into the hall. I didn't dare open the window and let this night air in on her. I saw a light down-stairs—I thought you might be sitting up—worrying—so I came to tell you you needn't. Shirley's all right."

She moved a little closer and finished bravely:

"But you're worrying just the same, and you've got to tell me why—*now.*"

Bruce drew a long breath. Nan's eyes held him, demanding an answer. Finally it came quietly, so quietly Nan could not at first believe the words held any tragedy.

"My business has gone to smash. There's nothing left."

The clock ticked silently. A log fell apart with a soft thud. Nan pushed her hair off her forehead and asked as quietly as he had spoken:

"Nothing?"

"A few shreds of silk."

"Well, what does it mean?"

"Mean? Here, sit down. You're trembling. Are you cold? Come over to the fire. I know, it's an unconscionable hour and you're in a wrapper. But you trust me and I understand you. Thank God, you're here. You always do the right thing at the right time. How do you manage it?"

Nan kept her wide eyes on him, sitting on the arm of the big chair and staring at this Bruce whose quiet composure was gone, who was talking fast and lighting matches with hands that shook the wee flame out, repeatedly.

"Well, what *does* it mean? We won't stay here, I suppose."

Bruce laughed.

"No, we won't stay here. We'll get out—move to a dinky house squeezed between objectionable and noisy neighbors. They're bound to be noisy, close and objectionable. There'll be a phonograph

on one side of us and a mechanical piano on the other. There'll be no Miss Burton, no Agnes, no Parker, no Perkins, no cook ——"

"Do you care so much?" Nan's quick voice stopped him. "Do you really care so much about a big place and servants?"

"Yes—no—I don't know. I'm used to them. Hate to be torn up—roots and all." Bruce was smoking hard, enveloping himself in a blue haze. He talked rapidly.

"We'll get one cook—a fat, sloppy colored woman probably. She'll have to do everything. Get meals, clean, wait on table, wash, iron, take care of the children ——"

"Take care of the children!" Nan was on her feet, trying to see through the blue mist. "What do you mean?"

Through the fog Bruce's words came hard, short.

"I can't afford you, Miss Carter. Didn't you realize that?"

The blue fog faded because Nan fell silent and Bruce wanted to find out what was happening to her. When he could finally see, Nan was still standing, hands clenched at her sides, head upflung and eyes with a challenge in them waiting to meet his. Her wrapper had opened a little and revealed the smooth whiteness of a lovely throat and a blue

ribbon of her nightgown that was fluttering under her rapid breathing.

"Did you think I'd leave you—*now?*" she asked. Her voice was even, cool. The excitement in Bruce quieted and he lowered the quality of his tone to meet her calm.

"How can you help it? I can't afford to pay you what you're worth."

"I'm not worth anything if I quit now."

"But child——" Bruce might have been remonstrating with Shirley. Nan's blue eyes blackened and flashed.

"Don't you understand?" she cried. "I *won't leave*. Do you suppose I *care* whether you can pay me or not? Do you suppose I want your money if you can't afford to give it to me? Do you imagine I'm staying for that? Did you dream I would hand Bob over to any careless, indifferent old colored woman—now, *now* after all those weeks of work and love? Why, how can you think it?"

Nan turned away, caught at the back of the chair and stood listening.

"You are speaking on the spur of the moment, out of a heart that is easily stirred to pity and kindness, out of an imagination that weaves dreams—terrible as well as bright. Nothing will happen to

Bob. You have laid a splendid foundation. I can build on that ——"

Nan faced him.

"Tell me honestly. Do you think Bob doesn't need me any more?"

Nan smiled at the silence that answered her.

"Do you think he doesn't want me any more?" she persisted quietly.

Bruce shook his head.

"Then ——" Nan's flashing glance demanded the truth. "*You* don't want me any more, for him."

"You know that isn't true. I want you, more than ever, for Bob, for Shirley, for—myself. Sometime I will tell you what your coming here has meant to me. I—it's been that that has worried me more than anything. The worry about the children—without you."

Nan's smile was heavenly.

"Don't let it worry you any more. They shan't have to do without me. I'm going to stay. You can't ——" her face was bright with a strange new light. "You can't dismiss me now that I know you really want me—need me."

A look of relief, of gratitude and of something else not quite clear to Nan in the dim fitfully lighted room, leaped to Bruce's eyes. It was reward

enough for Nan, even without the words that followed it.

"That is very like your dear generous self. But I can't accept your offer. I have no right to keep you, paying you only half what I am paying you now—I could manage that—when you could go elsewhere and get more."

He stopped before Nan's look and ended gently:

"At least I won't accept it now. I want you to think about it overnight. All it means to you. Remember, you've craved luxury, comforts for so long. Now you're having them and you'd have to give them all up again." He shook his head, smilingly. "You haven't thought, Nan."

"I've thought of everything," Nan said quietly. "It doesn't take a woman as long as a man. I've thought of it ten times while you were saying it. It doesn't make any difference. I'm going to stay with you—and Bob—and Shirley, so good-night."

At the door she turned and laughed, a tender, light, happy sound.

"I never once said I was sorry for you—about the smash-up. I am, of course, if you are. But ——" she wrinkled a puzzled brow. "I don't really think it's going to matter as much as you think it is."

"Why?" Bruce was after her eagerly.

"I don't know, truly, I don't." Nan held out a restraining hand. "I haven't thought it out. When I do, I'll tell you."

Sleep was gone for Nan that night. She huddled in the big wing-chair in the nursery before the dying fire. She was smiling and excited and rested and happy and muddled up about something. What was it? Oh, yes, her reason for thinking that being poor wasn't going to matter so much as he—Bruce—thought. She must think it out because he was wanting to know. Was it because so much of the house was unlived in that giving it up would be like giving up something that belonged to somebody else, not them, and it wouldn't hurt? Possibly, but there was more to the reason than that. Was it because she had been poor and knew that it brought understanding, which was valuable, and effort, which was good,—and the need of pretence,—which was sweet? Possibly, but there was more than that to the reason. There was a something she hadn't grasped yet, a something eluding her, haunting her.

Nan sat quite still, her head thrown back, her eyes on the glittering stars outside. She was waiting expectantly for something to come and as she waited the black heavens lightened, dimming the shining stars. Morning was coming. Light. That was what Nan wanted. She watched the darkness lift

and leave and a still white dawn spread over the world outside the window.

Nan leaned forward, suddenly intent. What was that? Fairy voices or her memory of them? There came a sound of high shrill laughter and piping tones.

"You've left out the most important part of your dream!"

With a beating heart Nan stared out at the brightening world. That was it—the rest of the reason. She had left out the most important part and she hadn't known it till now. She had wanted a home and children, that was all. Well, she had them but she wanted more now. She wanted love, the love of a man, of a husband.

Bruce's love.

Nan smiled and rose. A quiet ecstasy filled her. She knew now why it was that it didn't matter where she lived, whether she was rich or poor, whether she were paid for service or not. She loved Bruce. She wanted to be with him, helping him, always.

Nan's face was white and tired but strangely and stilly beautiful. She moved to the two beds, stood looking down at the sleeping children and the tenderness that had made Bruce lift her hand to his cheek, filled her eyes. She loved the children—just as

much as ever. More, perhaps, for there was in the feeling now a something intimate and sweet. But it didn't fill her as it used to. It wasn't as possessing. While loving Bruce ——

Nan went through the door into her room and lay down on her bed. There was simply no use in trying to find big enough words for a something too big for words to fit.

CHAPTER XII

NAN went through the duties of the next day in a dream. Everything was so different! The very house seemed to take on a different aspect and every slightest noise stirred her blood and sent the tell-tale color flying to her face. A door shutting—was it Bruce entering or leaving? A bell ringing—was Bruce sending word for her to come to him? A footstep—could it be his?

When she went down-stairs to take the children out her heart was pounding. Bruce's den such a little way behind her! Might he not appear? Might he not join them? The ecstasy of the thought set her trembling. Nan hoped he would. Then she hoped he wouldn't, because she was terribly afraid he would guess her secret. It filled her eyes—how could he help but see? Breathing with Bruce close was so difficult. He would be sure to guess.

And yet, woman-wise, Nan had a faint consciousness of Bruce's love for her. It would be too wonderful —— But she must keep the thought unshaped, hide it sternly in the deep recesses of her heart. She must not mistake a desire for a reality. Besides the thought was presumptuous. What was there about her for a man like Bruce to love? Nan lashed herself to humility, determined never to let

herself believe it until she heard it—and continued to hug memories of swift glances and unfinished sentences, suggestive of the sweet possibility.

The day passed and Nan had not seen or heard Bruce. Dusk came—the difficult hour when every game had been played, every stunt invented, every story told and every song sung. Nan was in her room. The two children were sprawled on the floor before the fire looking at her photograph album, when Agnes appeared with a note.

"Dear Nan"—

Thus easily, without apology or question, formality had been dropped between them.

"DEAR NAN:

"Business calls me suddenly to Washington. I will be gone a week—ten days—perhaps more. Please say nothing of what I told you last night to anyone, and think, if you can, of a way of making Santa Claus appear both economical and extravagant this year. I leave Christmas plans in your hands. We will stay here, but of course, there cannot be the orgy of gifts there has always been.

"The memory of your dearness last night stays with me—immeasurable comfort and support. But you must be very, very sure of yourself before I accept your generosity. Give it plenty of thought while I am away. My children are safe with you.

"Yours,

"BRUCE."

Nan sprang to her feet. Bruce had gone! Without a good-bye! She wasn't to see him for weeks! Finding Agnes' eyes on her in some surprise she said quickly:

"Mr. Wilson has left me with directions which are a little vague. Has he gone, Agnes?"

"Yes, ma'am. He left this morning early for New York. Parker brought the note back just now."

Nan sat down again.

"All right. It's about Christmas—but I guess I can manage. Thank you, Agnes."

The children were still absorbed. Nan read the brief little note again and then fell a-dreaming. It was the first note she had ever had from him, and though it said little, it seemed to say much, to be breathing warmly many unsaid thoughts. The dropping of the "Miss" before her name implied a new comradeship. How glad she was that she had yielded to that mad impulse last night. Glad? Heavens! The word was utterly inadequate. When the still hours following her impetuous rush to the den had shown her life's meaning.

"Nan!"

Nan jumped, thrust the letter inside her dress, and fought back the shy sweet color that swept up over her face.

"Yes, dear."

"That's fifty-'leven times I've called you." Bob was reproachful. "You're all afire. Didn't you hear?"

"No, Bob, Nan was thinking. What is it?"

"Please put this in my letter to Santa Claus—skates and a sled ——"

"I've got a brand-new idea."

Bob swung around, hugging his knees between his hands, his head flung up to listen. Nan's ideas were generally good. Shirley scrambled to Nan's lap.

"How would you like to have a different kind of Christmas this year?"

"How—different?" Bob was wary.

"Like the kind I used to have." Nan began to glow. "It was such fun! We all of us made things for each other—wonderful surprises. Nobody knew what anybody else was going to get but we were all terribly busy guessing."

Bob was doubtful but he was always willing to look all around a proposition.

"For instance," Nan's quick smile flashed from Shirley to Bob. "You could get out your tool box, Bob, that Santa Claus brought you last year which you've never used. And I could show you how to make a scrap basket for Daddy. He needs one

terribly. And Miss Burton wants a stand for her plant. What color do you think would be nice, Bob?"

"Me—paint it myself?" Bob's eyes kindled.

"Of course."

"Well—I love red." It was decisive but his glance begged approval.

Nan nodded.

"So does Miss Burton. And for Shirley—hop off, girly,—I want to whisper a secret to Brother."

The secret being imparted Bob rose. Enthusiasm was lit in him.

"I'm going to get my tool box *now*."

"To-day isn't a bit too soon to begin," Nan agreed. "We have—let's see—mercy! Here it is almost the middle of November, not much more than a month!"

"Tirley 'ant to make some Kissmus pwesents. For Daddy, an' Nan, an' Bob. An' Mitz Button."

Nan caught Shirley's hands and danced with her into the nursery.

"So you shall, darling. So you shall. The nursery will be our workshop. Clear off the window sill and bring over the little chairs while I run down and ask Perkins for some wood!"

Not for nothing had Nan had four young brothers. Under the direction of her capable and

clever hands, the beginnings of a scrap basket appeared. It was, of course, to have a design. Bob was entranced. After long moments of squirming deliberation, pond lilies were chosen.

"Because Dad is related to the fairies," he explained. "And the fairies live in 'em."

Nan nodded, and pond lilies were drawn on the four pieces of wood that were sawed into shape.

While Bob was painstakingly at work painting a black background for the white lilies and green leaves, Nan began collecting before Shirley's delighted eyes ribbons and scissors, bright blotters and pictures.

"Daddy needs a new blotter for his desk. See, we'll cut out three pieces—a green and blue and brown—and tie them together with this red ribbon. Then we'll paste on a calendar—and ——"

"Tirley want to cut him out."

The difficult hour sped on wings. Ideas came as work progressed. Cook was to have a sachet, Agnes a handkerchief case. Nan expressed a desire for a glove box that she was sure Bob and Shirley could make between them. There were to be blotters enough for everyone and Bob showed an inclination to put a scrap basket in each room, but Nan knew that variety was the spice of life and wisely limited the number.

And while fingers flew tongues did also. Nan found herself rather hard put to it to explain why skates and sleds weren't left for each of the boys, when she was a little girl, and why not finding them, they were still quite, oh—*quite* happy, on Christmas day in the morning.

"Usually we found," Nan said, "that Santa had left just *one* nice thing for each of us, that we wanted very, very much. Now Bob, if you had to choose,—just one of all the things you thought you wanted,—what would it be?"

Bob's mind ranged over the list, his paint-brush suspended in the air.

"That," he said gravely, "is hard to say."

"I know!" Shirley, shivering with excitement, pranced about Nan. "I'd wanta—wanta—bed for Betsy doll. Wiv a leeta peelow—an' a b'anket."

"I'd choose the sled," Bob finally decided. "'Cause you haven't skates and Shirley's too little. But we could *all* sled."

What matter if days were stormy? There was no end to the interest of this new game. Hints were shouted before a tantalized Agnes. Secrets nearly burst from their keepers. The holiday spirit rioted gleefully day by day and Christmas promised to be truly a day of giving—and getting. No one was forgotten in that big house and it was a new

thought to the children that grown-ups might like gifts too.

It was over three weeks before Bruce returned. Then he appeared unannounced in the nursery one night. Nan, looking up over a clutter of paint boxes, scrap baskets, tools, ribbons and paper, felt the color flood her face. Mercifully, the scramble instantly necessary to hide Christmas surprises from Daddy, saved her. She had herself well in hand and her secret tucked sternly out of sight before Bruce was allowed to enter the nursery again.

"What's the meaning of all this mystery?"

Jubilant explanations tumbled forth. Bruce shot an understanding glance of gratitude at Nan. What a wonder she was! Economizing for him. Giving to Christmas a new zest for everyone in the house, teaching the youngsters how to use their hands and their heads and their hearts, and herself having the best time of all.

"I've got to be off again to-night," he told her, while supper was in progress. He was in the wing-chair, she in the low rocker. Agnes presided at the table.

Nan leaned over to pick up some scraps from the floor. Disappointment had leaped so swiftly to her eyes.

"Well, do plan to be here for Christmas," she said lightly.

The seriousness of his reply startled her.

"I'll try. This is a trip to the coast," he went on, his eyes on the fire. "A last frantic effort to raise money, for the accomplishment of ——" he stopped suddenly. "I can't go into it now. But sometime, if you're interested, I'll tell you."

"I'd love to hear," Nan held her voice to quiet. "Do you mean there's a possibility of saving something from the wreckage?"

He nodded.

"Something like that. At least there's something new afoot, that may haul us all out of deep water, in time. But it'll take time." Excitement grew in him. "If it does succeed—this project—it'll pay in more ways than one."

The gleam of battle was in his eyes. Nan's heart sang. So long as he was fighting, not knocked flat by the blows of life, he would win out.

"A merger with another company?" she asked.

He looked at her, blankness in his eyes at first.

"Oh, no. I sold out my business long ago. I'm started on something else, something quite new, and different."

He pulled out his watch.

"There's a man coming at eight, and I must get

dinner before that, repack and be ready to start on the midnight express."

"But you *will* be here by Christmas?" She could not keep quite all the eager pleading from her face.

"I certainly will, if I have to charter a special. I'll try to be here by Christmas eve. I want a talk with you, Nan, a long one, about—all kinds of things."

The firelight or a creeping flush stained Nan's cheeks. She could not say a word. Bruce leaned toward her.

"I hate to go," he said in a low voice. "I'd rather stay here, where my heart is."

From somewhere far away Nan summoned her voice, a light laughing voice.

"Well, you have us to come back to. We'll still be here, you know."

"I know." He caught her hand, held it tightly a moment in his two strong warm ones, then dropped it.

"Good-bye."

It was not the economical desire to save electricity that night that sent Nan quietly to the head of the stairs just before midnight. She simply wanted to see Bruce once more before he went. So, with hot cheeks and eyes shamed at her boldness she huddled

in a silent heap on the top step. The upper hall was in darkness but through the bannisters Nan could see in the lighted lower hall the hat rack and the front door.

She could hear voices in Bruce's den. That man must still be there. How busy Bruce was. What long hours he kept and how hard he worked. But that was better, oh, infinitely better than sitting in despair, fighting black thoughts. Much as Nan minded his being away, she preferred to have this new something absorb him just now. Preferred it for two reasons,—it was best for Bruce and easier for her. How could he help but see she loved him when just his eyes resting on her in warmth and friendliness drove the breath clean from her body.

Ah! The door was opening. They were coming. Nan pressed herself closer into the black blur of the bannisters. Surely she was in shadow. Her dark wrapper was not discernible.

Voices. And the two men came into her line of vision. As he talked, Bruce's arm reached out and he picked up a hat and gave it to the slim stooped stranger who stood with his back to Nan. She gave him scarcely a glance. Her look was on the figure of the man whom she loved, watching his big swift movements as he shrugged himself into his fur coat, seeing his eyes with that bright glow in

them when he was keenly interested. Even under his hat and at that distance his face seemed alive with excitement while his body, in spite of its usual quiet movement, showed a repression of vibrancy that reached up to Nan. She shivered a little.

Then at the door as Bruce stepped back to let the older man pass out before him, Nan heard the stranger speak. She could not remember a word that he said but a familiar quality in his voice stayed by her. She found herself wondering whose voice it was all the time that she wanted to be remembering how Bruce looked when he didn't know he was being looked at. And she couldn't tell, couldn't place the voice.

Nan was in bed, on the edge of sleep when it came to her, as clearly as lightning in a black sky. The voice was Ferguson's. John Ferguson, the inventor of the machine, for whom her father had sacrificed his fortune, was here in business parley with Bruce. And Nan had told Bruce of Ferguson. What did it mean?

CHAPTER XIII

For the next two weeks Nan had plenty of time to think and her thoughts spun out like a spider's web, in endless circles that spread a gray film over the joy and serenity that had been hers.

If Ferguson were in touch with Bruce it could mean only one thing. Bruce had taken advantage of Nan's confidence and was, for some motive as yet unknown to her, having business conferences with him. Bruce had been in the silk business. Ferguson had invented a new machine for finishing silk with a new lustre. The natural conclusion was that these discussions bore on their mutual interest and work.

But Bruce could not buy the patents from John. He had told her himself his firm had failed. He had sold out, before submerging entirely, but at a great loss. They were to move from this lovely place to smaller quarters, where quite decidedly Bruce was averse to living. Surely then he was not in a position to consider buying valuable rights from a man who held them as dear as life itself.

What then? Was he trying to interest moneyed people, trying to get the machine on the market? Why? How could he, under the present circumstances, afford to spend time on a proposition like

that unless he was to profit considerably himself? If he *was* to profit—but how could that be? John was to receive half the profits, the Carters the other half, if the machine were ever marketed. Would John divide with Bruce for the sake of seeing his dream come true? Nan believed not. Oh, assuredly not! Hadn't Ferguson promised her father he would never let the patents leave his hands? He wanted to do it all himself or not at all. He was a stubborn man, Nan remembered her father saying, one of those possessed of a single track mind. He had room for only a single idea at a time, and the tenacity of a bulldog for clinging to it.

A possible solution flashed into her mind but it was an ugly thing, unworthy of her new faith in men, her great love for Bruce. Nan dismissed it at once but the fact that it had made entrance was disturbing to her peace. Oh, if only she could answer some of these unanswerable questions! There were so many! Why, if Bruce wasn't to profit materially, was he doing this? Good as he was he wasn't entirely a philanthropist. He wouldn't do as big a thing as this for Ferguson, who was an utter stranger to him until a few months ago.

But was he an utter stranger? Nan didn't know. She knew no way of being sure. If Bruce had

known him it seemed queer that he hadn't mentioned it at the time she was telling him her father's story. Why shouldn't it have been the most natural thing in the world for him to turn in surprise to Nan and say—"John Ferguson! Why, I know him!" He had, to be sure, shown an unusual interest as she talked. Nan remembered it now. He had hurled questions at her with a javelin swiftness. But still, she might only be imagining that. An imagination let loose runs like a colt. Nan checked hers sternly.

If then, John were not the stranger Nan's first instinct had prompted her to feel, she had no right to question Bruce. There are some things one may ask and others one may not. Presuming that Bruce and John were meeting on matters of no concern to Nan herself, it would be impossible for her to open the way to a discussion of any sort.

Nan agonized and wondered. Alternately she trusted and distrusted. Distrust once lodged meant a killing of her new love, a wiping out of all joy for long endless years. It meant, why, it meant Nan would have to go. She couldn't possibly stay here with Bruce with this between them.

What was it he had said that day in the limousine? "You must promise never to hate me, Miss Nan, always to trust me." And when she had

hesitated he had told her that trusting was for dark places as well as light, for blindness as well as vision. So she had finally promised. This surely was a dark place. Was Nan's trust in Bruce of strong enough stuff for her to lean on until the coming of light?

Without love it might not have been, but Nan's love, though new, was a tremendous force, a deep, still power of which she was as yet only faintly aware. It was enough, however, to drive doubt away and to steady her determination not to question Bruce's integrity by a word or a further thought.

With this decision there came to Nan the sudden hope that she had been mistaken, that the voice she had heard was not, after all, Ferguson's. She might be wrong. She hadn't seen his face, hadn't recognized his figure, hadn't heard him speak since she was a child. How easily she might have been misled.

So Christmas eve found Nan awaiting Bruce's return in palpitating eagerness, and Nan, snuggled deep in a leather chair in Bruce's den could recall nothing but the dearness of him.

Up-stairs the two children were sound asleep, their red stockings dangling with an empty expectancy from their bed posts. A small light was

left burning so that they could see Santa Claus if they should happen to waken when he came. Nan had stayed in her living-room, tying up the last of the earnestly made gifts that had only that afternoon been finished. At nine o'clock Bruce had not yet returned. Shouldn't she and Perkins carry down the packages and place them about the tree? She needn't start trimming for an hour, but if he didn't come soon ——

So the bundles were carried down and Perkins had gone to the service portion of the house. Nan had returned to her room and tried to read. Then the idea came that she would wait for Bruce in his den.

Why not? Wouldn't finding her there warm his home-coming? Would he be glad? Or would he think her bold and consider it an intrusion? Nan's struggle was sharp but short. For desire to miss no moment of the evening with him, to be near his possessions while waiting, was stronger than her usual reserve. Anyway the tree must be trimmed to-night and if he wasn't home in time to help her—as his last letter had promised he would be—she must do it herself.

This decision strengthened her courage and though excitement burned her cheeks and lit fires in her eyes she made her swift way down to the be-

loved room. The fragrance of the evergreen tree, whose tip touched the ceiling, filled the air and mingled pleasantly with the odor of burning apple-tree. Outside in the velvet darkness snow was falling silently, the heavy carpeting and curtaining of the world dulling all sounds. Nan liked this sense of withdrawal. It would make their togetherness, when he came, so much closer. She put out a hand and touched the big chair near her. It was sweet to be here. Bruce seemed so much nearer here than anywhere. His pipe, left on the stand as though he had just gone from the room a moment, his desk immaculate except for the big blotter. Nan smiled at a memory. He hated a clean blotter, he said. It prevented his working.

Bruce had written twice, brief hurried notes, but in each was some little sentence that made them precious to Nan. "I shall be glad to get home." And—"I think of you often." Meagre enough perhaps, but also, perhaps, pregnant with meaning.

And he had sounded happy. He *was* happy. Miss Burton had seen it too. She had come to Nan's room with her slipping shawl and flying hair and pattering conversation, and had remarked several times that Bruce was "so different—she was so *glad*. He hadn't been so, well, so *happy* for years and of course it's because ——"

But the reason trailed into silence as Miss Burton caught at escaping words and an escaping shawl with a little gasp. Nan was left to draw her own conclusions. (It was funny, she thought, how a woman could say so much and yet leave so much unsaid.) She laid his "difference" to his joy in Bob's improvement, to his closer intimacy with both his children, to his new business interests and the zest of fighting to the top again.

A muffled ring sounded through the house. Followed the opening and shutting of a door and Perkins's soft footsteps. Nan sprang up, suddenly ashamed of her presence here in Bruce's den, deciding to fly to her room.

But there wasn't time. The big front door closed and Bruce's deep tones came to her ears in a greeting to the man servant, then rapid footsteps to the den. Nan was caught, and she stood, in a wild, shy embarrassment, a hand on the back of the big chair, the other half out, as Bruce entered swiftly.

He took the outstretched hand in his two and for a second there was nothing in the room or in the world for Nan but Bruce's face above hers, his brown eyes smiling down at her.

"Home! And you here waiting for me. I hoped you'd think of it." Still he held her hand and still he looked at Nan until her eyes dropped

beneath the intensity in his. "I might have known you would think of it though!"

"Oh, but I didn't do it for *you!* I came because ——"

"Because you wanted to?"

Nan pulled her hand away.

"Because the tree has to be trimmed and it's getting frightfully late, and I thought—I had just made up my mind to begin without you."

Bruce laughed a great hearty laugh, scolding her for being so uncomplimentary. Nan's momentary confusion passed. She laughed with him, while something within her sang because he had been glad to find her there. There was no shadow of doubt about that. He had hoped she would be there.

They plunged into the business of trimming the tree. Bruce on a ladder earnestly striving for artistic effects, balancing dangerously on the top step to fasten a star to the tree top, talking a lot of nonsense, with a few questions shot at her between whiles—Nan wanted to keep the memory of him vivid in her heart but for some reason—perhaps it was her own self-consciousness or her own joy—impressions were indistinct. She could not afterward recall anything that was said in that hour. Meaningful glances, high moments of sweetness, when a sudden silence became heavy with unsaid things,

slight touchings when her hair brushed his cheek or his hand her shoulder;—these gave their thrill and returned with an elusive bitter-sweet clearness to Nan in later days.

It was not until the tree stood fully dressed in its gleaming tinsel glory and Bruce turned to her abruptly, that Nan's senses sharpened.

"Will you stay a while longer? I have some things I want to say to you."

Nan's chair was in shadow, Bruce sat fully in the light of the fire, his gaze fastened on the flames, his elbows on his knees. Nan knew at once that intimate things were to be revealed to her and she drew a sharp little breath. Bruce began with no explanation or embarrassment.

Quite simply, with a very evident effort to be fair, he told her of his marriage to Margaret. It was nothing unusual, a young idealistic man giving to a beautiful woman all his first fine faith and splendid love. The gradual discovery that beneath the beauty was an utterly selfish heart. His disappointment, his stubborn blindness as he clung to the belief that if she was not all he dreamed her, she could be if she would. The little pathetic blundering ways in which he had tried to make her over. There was his first big mistake. She resented the change in his attitude. Humble worship was to her liking,

but a husband, who clearly saw her faults, who wanted to reform her, who was not to be hoodwinked or swerved from his sense of justice and right, was decidedly an embarrassment. He put her on edge until a series of annoyances culminated in a scene in which pretence fled and civility was forgotten and she was brutally truthful. She told him she had married him for his money, had not wanted her first child and was about to consult a doctor in order to avoid a second such accident.

To a man brought up as Bruce had been, with reverence for motherhood a part of his creed, this frank revelation was sickening. He left his wife's room with his passion dead and his love turned to ashes.

"I think I could have passed over everything but her indifference to Bob. There was hostility in her eyes when she looked at him. He had cost her much pain, to be sure, but it wasn't that. It was the swift maturing of her figure, the falling out of her hair—she had beautiful hair—the inescapable aging of her features that she had resented. She didn't know that the marks of service are honorable and possess a beauty all their own."

Bruce paused. His face showed that this opening of an old wound had been difficult.

"Shirley was born two months too soon and

Margaret died. We didn't think Shirley would live. She was a frail baby, hanging by a thread to this world for months. Her physical growth and remarkable sweetness of disposition have been an unending wonder to me when I remember her mother during those months."

In the silence of the room came the soft sound of tumbling logs burned to embers and the steady ticking of a clock. Abruptly Bruce rose, standing with his back to the dying fire, his eyes on the slim white figure of the girl in the deep shadows.

"That's all. I wanted you to know."

Nan drew a long breath. (Had she breathed at all since he began?) She wanted to say just the right thing, but, plunging about in her mind for the thought that would best express her response to this confidence, she could find nothing that seemed to suit. And the more she groped the more determinedly something fitting eluded her.

"I'm so sorry," she said at last in a low voice. "So dreadfully sorry you had to be so hurt."

Bruce was at ease again, lighting his pipe, settling with relief in his chair again.

"Disillusionment must come to us all at some time, I suppose. I thought for a long time my faith in the beauty of woman was gone forever. Thanks to you, my dear, it has come back."

His casual tone forbade Nan's attributing any particular intention to his words. Before she could reply he went on in the same easy level voice:

"You've been a dream come true. That's why you were unbelievable, why I wouldn't trust you at first. I probably hurt you by my skepticism, but you understand now." He smiled at her quietly. "You understand too why I was so cut up at the thought of losing you. You haven't changed your mind about that?" This was a sudden startled afterthought. Nan smiling, shook her head. Their eyes met and a quiet content filled the room. Bruce rebuilt the fire and the sweetness grew in silence. A word or a thought could spoil it. Nan held her breath in fear, but when he spoke again it was to tell her of his plans. He had had, he said, an offer for the house and contents that was satisfactory. The buyer was in no hurry to obtain occupancy and they would have two or three months in which to find another home. They would take with them nothing but the furniture in his den. His eyes swept lovingly over the old mahogany.

"It all belonged to my father," he said.

"Tell me about him." It was asked more with the idea of keeping Bruce talking than from any real curiosity. She waited in some surprise at the little pause that met her request.

"Some time I'm going to," he said at last. "He wasn't always understood. I'd like you to think of him as he truly was. But not to-night."

Miss Burton was to remain with them, he went on. She had offered to do all the mending and run the house. She would find and engage some woman to cook and another to do the laundry and cleaning. Nan's hands would be filled caring for the children. He expected to keep one car which he would drive himself. He would also tend the furnace, shovel sidewalks, and rake leaves ——

Nan clapped her hands.

"Oh, fun! I'll help you!"

He turned toward her, amused and impatient. She was, he declared, just pretending. His lazy smile made her eyes flash, and he spoke quickly.

"It's dear—your pretend game—and plucky, and I don't know but what it's the sportingest way of meeting life. But I worry, sometimes, about you. I do so wonder what's going to happen to you when you come to the place where pretending does no good."

Some fear of this happening showed itself in Nan's eyes and communicated itself to him before she flung her retort:

"I'll never get there!"

Bruce said nothing, but his look probed deep. It was almost as if he could see into her heart, could know she was pretending now, fiercely, determinedly. Quite unexpectedly Nan grew frightened. He did know more of life than she. Did that time have to come? Her look was a little piteous. Bruce's hand came over on hers for a brief comforting moment.

"I hope not—for you. I'd like to be around if it does."

But somehow a shadow had fallen. Happiness seemed to leak from her heart leaving it empty and hurt. She rose and the two of them went up to the nursery and filled the stockings in silence. Just as they finished Bob gave a tremendous sigh, opened an eye, flounced over and fell into sleep again. Bruce caught Nan's hand and they tiptoed like two culprits into the hall.

In the hall he suddenly turned to her, both his hands on her shoulders.

"You won't forget a promise you made me, will you?"

Nan was helpless under his touch. She raised questioning eyes.

"Never to hate me. Always to trust me. Promise it again, Nan."

She caught her breath. For the briefest second

her eyes wavered, then she summoned all her desire to make it her belief.

"Yes, Bruce, I do."

But Bruce had seen the hesitancy and his eyes reflected in their depths the regret that he had glimpsed in hers. His hands fell.

"Good-night—little pretender."

CHAPTER XIV

It was terribly distressing. Nan knew something—but not enough of it. Bruce knew she knew but he couldn't possibly know what or how, or how much. Nevertheless the Thing,—whatever it was—was between them. If they tried talking, the Thing would only grow greater. Yet not to talk meant leaving the Thing right there. It would grow in either case to immense proportions. Well, however ugly it was, Christmas day was to be unspoiled by it. No shadow of anything real or unreal must fall on the brightness of the children's day of days.

This was Nan's determination, as she rose the next morning. It was also Bruce's and from the moment when the two met in the dark morning hours in the nursery, each felt the other's resolve to make this such a Christmas as had never been known in the big house, such a one as would always be remembered with smiles of gladness. Bruce came into the room in his dressing-gown, as eager as the children over the stockings bursting forth their surprises. A fire was lit in the fireplace and the four of them marvelled over toys until light came to reveal a snowbound world. The cold eye of the morning looking in on the informal scene, seemed

to cast disapproving glances and simultaneously Nan and Bruce withdrew to finish dressing themselves for the day.

They all breakfasted together in the dining-room, Miss Burton included. This breaking of precedent for Bruce might have been awkward, but the children tided over the first difficult moment when they were all seated. Thanks to them, too, the solemn grandeur of the room lost its impressiveness and when the sun reached the long narrow windows stretching golden fingers through to touch the silver on the sideboard, and the heavy gilt frames surrounding ancestral pictures, the room seemed actually to twinkle with laughter.

Order and routine were banished for the day. Obeying the fluttering summons of the housekeeper the servants gathered in silent amazement at the door of Bruce's den. Hitherto their Christmas gifts in the shape of an impersonal check had been given them in their quarter of the house. But this inclusion in the family room, while Bob with a pardonable pride, and Shirley in an ecstasy of excitement, presented the remembrances made by themselves, was a touching moment. The cook grew red, then white, and her embarrassed gulp of thanks ended behind her apron. Agnes' homely face was transformed by something akin to loveli-

ness, and Perkins, whose features had always been as stiff as his body, was moved to a violent blowing of his nose, that seemed to heave his whole face into another expression.

Nan was never to forget that hour. She was withdrawn slightly from the others, a spectator. She exulted over Bob, her dear difficult laddie, whose sullenness seemed to be wiped forever from his fine earnest face. The picture of Shirley, a radiant, vibrant little figure, her sweet face all smiles, her slim quivering body all grace, cut itself indelibly into her heart. Strangely enough, at this moment when her love for these two children was almost an unbearable ache in her throat, there came stabbing into her mind a return of her doubt of Bruce, of his relations with Ferguson. She put it from her and turned her eyes on him. In spite of the children he dominated the scene, tactfully helping Bob read names, controlling Shirley's excitement and keeping her curious hands from exploring the fascinating possibilities of his desk—a forbidden pleasure. Somehow, too, he extended to the huddled self-conscious group of servants in the doorway, the feeling of the brotherhood of man, the Christmas spirit in its essence. His glance met hers and Nan's doubt vanished like a pricked bubble. It is impossible to hold love and distrust both

in one's heart. One must surely drive the other out.

The rest of the morning flew on wings. They must all go out and try the new sled, and Bruce laughingly demanded Nan's approval of the way he had learned to "kick up his heels." When coasting grew monotonous, they made an enormous snowball and a wonderful snowman, and this, in turn, led to the suggestion that they have a sleigh-ride in the afternoon. Bruce drove, with Nan beside him. And the two children, on either side of Miss Burton, sat in the rear seat.

In spite of the clear keen air, and the merry music of the bells, there crept over Bruce and Nan a little dimming fear. A constraint fell upon them. Conversation lagged, then dropped. Neither made an effort to start it. Nan was possessed by the strange feeling that to-day was to end a certain unnamed loveliness that had existed between them. She shook her head and stiffened herself against it.

"This won't do, will it?" he said quietly.

"No. What is it anyway?"

He looked down at her.

"With me it was only the usual dread of pulling up stakes. Was there anything else?"

Nan's glance met his and suddenly her eyes were filled with tears.

"I don't know. I hate it too," she whispered. "I'm afraid."

"What are you afraid of?"

Nan shook her head.

"Is there something ——?"

But Nan, aching to talk, could not. Oh, if she could. If only words would clear up this muddle, tidy up the confusion in her soul! But there were no words. There were nothing but feelings. And words never fit those. Better not try.

Her throat was swollen with tears. She shook her head again quite determinedly. No, of course not. She was just tired, and when she was, she was always imaginative. She supposed it was nothing but hating to leave the big place too. And that was silly because everything would be dear and cosy in the wee house once she got there. She not only believed it. She knew it. She'd been in one. He must trust her this time. Anyway this worry was unfair to the children and nonsensical besides.

Nan nearly convinced herself, and Bruce, understanding perhaps more than she guessed, helped along her pretence, so that by the time dusk descended and they were warming stiffened limbs before a splendid fire in Bruce's den, each was making a rather creditable showing of happiness. There was, to be sure, a suspicion of moisture in Nan's

deep eyes as she sat in the firelight telling a Christmas story and there was a forced sprightliness in Bruce's tone when he bade them turn around to see the Christmas tree lit up with its hundreds of tiny colored lights, but the children were unaware of it. And as darkness shut the world from them and the two tired children turned to the grown-ups with an unconscious appeal for understanding and peace and a continuation of good cheer, Bruce and Nan found their pretence becoming real, their contentment a very definite and firmly rooted feeling. As though the darkness and the four walls and the closed door could keep it in, so they lengthened that last long hour until Shirley's golden head lay still against Nan's breast and Bob's dark brooding eyes drooped wearily.

Nan had hoped that Christmas evening might be spent as Christmas eve had been. They two together in the warm safe comfort of his den. Somehow it was easier to fight off this queer dread when one wasn't alone. And he had promised so many times to tell her of his new business. She half planned to give him an opportunity that night. If he would talk to her frankly of his work she was sure her misgivings would be laid to rest. She wanted something definite from him,—details, not just vague generalities.

But though the evening began right, it ended miserably. There was the fragrant firelit room in all its dear familiarity but Nan's first question brought a change in Bruce's attitude. From an eager, earnest attention to her his glance shifted to one of abstraction and slight concern. With too great carelessness he suggested that they leave business for another night. This was a holiday. Nan's spirit froze and fright began beating within her like a prisoned bird. Just as the situation became awkward, Perkins appeared with a card. Nan heard Bruce mutter an exclamation, give a murmured direction to the butler, then his excuses to her. He was so sorry—it was an unexpected call —if it were business it was too important to put off —if it were pleasure he was so tremendously indebted to the man he had to see him. Nan rose quickly.

"Why, of course, I understand perfectly."

Which is something ladies usually say when they understand not at all.

CHAPTER XV

The days passed swiftly. Nan told Bob and Shirley of the intended change of affairs and they took it as a new excitement, as children will. So long as there would remain familiar faces, meals at usual times and two wee white beds at night, nothing else mattered. At any rate, to Bob's "When?" Nan's "In a month or two" meant an eternity. The matter soon lost importance.

Bruce had asked Nan to do the house hunting. With sparkling eyes she had agreed. It was not, he said, to be one of a row. It need not be modern, or respectable or near the station. It need not cost more than three thousand, must not cost more than ten. But it must have—outside and inside—personality.

Nan had nodded eagerly. She knew! She knew just what he wanted. A wee white house snuggling under talking trees, a house whose front door was a smile, whose walls were loving arms, whose fireplace was a great warm heart.

She left the children nearly every day with Agnes and went house-hunting. At first, it was thrilling business, with always the hope that to-day the little place would be found. But it wasn't. January came and went and February blustered half of its way

through the year. Nan was getting tired. All the attractive houses were too expensive. All the others were "one of a row." She decided to leave the agents alone and go exploring herself.

So on one of those surprising days in winter when the air is as soft and tender as a first kiss and Spring seems surely to be only just around the corner, Nan started out. She had noted several roads she wanted to investigate, roads winging off the main streets, roads alluring to a poet, but forbidding to a motorist. On one of these Parker stopped the car.

"I didn't put the chains on, Miss, and I don't think we'd better try to go any further through this mud without them. Do you really think there's anything this way to look at?" he finished doubtfully.

Nan knew there was. She had seen it from a hilltop in the town, a little house cuddled deep in a pine grove. It might be very disappointing, it might not be for sale, but this was surely the road to it, and she had to see.

"I'll walk. Wait here for me, Parker."

She started out, rubberless, of course, but determined. Parker protested but Nan waded on, cheeks flushed and eyes bright. Maybe she was a little idiot but at least she'd be *satisfied*.

She was gone so long that Parker finally followed. He discovered her sitting on the rickety porch scribbling busily in a note-book.

"It's the place, Parker," she cried. "Just what I've been looking for. Terribly shabby and floppity in spots—look out for that first step—but adorable. There was a window broken. I crawled through—want to?"

Parker was polite but dubious. Perhaps she knew. He supposed paint *would* help, and new windows.

"It's for sale. Through that agent we've been to six times. Take me back there at once, Parker. We mustn't lose this."

Parker privately thought there wouldn't be much danger. In silently increasing amazement he returned her to the agent and heard her announce a short ten minutes later that the house was theirs. They could move in to-morrow.

"And will you?"

Nan laughed merrily.

"Mercy no! There'll be plumbers and carpenters and painters rushed out there, and I shall have to buy ——"

She fell into an ecstatic revery. Rag rugs all through, to go with the white woodwork. How stunning Bruce's antique mahogany would look in

that living-room. Painted furniture in the dining-room and all the bedrooms. It was cheap—at least as cheap as anything pretty could be—and always attractive. That big room up-stairs across the front with the fireplace should be the children's. She'd take the tiny alcove room opening from it—queer little room, dear little room. Big enough for a bed and a bureau. Anyway she'd be near Bob and Shirley and that would leave a nice room for Miss Burton and a splendid room at the back of the house for Bruce. His was down two little steps and over the kitchen. It had three windows and a glorious view on to an apple orchard and distant rolling hills.

Nan could scarcely wait to tell Bruce of her find. She changed her muddy clothes, hurried through her dinner and went flying to the den. On the way Perkins informed her that Mr. Wilson had telephoned he would not be back till late. He had left a telephone number if anything important came up. Nan, suddenly impatient, stamped her foot, shook her head, smiled and went on. At least she would leave a note on his desk, a triumphant shout of their good luck asking him to go with her to the place as soon as he could. Could he to-morrow?

At the door of his den she paused abruptly. Then with a low exclamation she went in. The room was in such confusion as she had never seen it.

Books pulled from the bookcases and strewn over the floor, an inkwell upset and dribbling its murky contents over scattered papers on the desk; drawers half opened and in complete disorder. Nan knew in a flash that Shirley had escaped Agnes' watchful eye and had satisfied her curiosity regarding Daddy's desk.

Her sharp exclamation was followed by a soft laugh. No real harm had been done, except for the inky mess. Apparently this had offered genuine entertainment for the imaginative child. The black river was filled with little clips and pen points and matches that had served their turn as boats.

Nan set to work cleaning up. First the books and the papers and pencils scattered over the floor. Then the desk. She wiped up the ink, washed off the desk top, threw away the big blotter and finally sat down in an orderly room to glance over the papers that had been soaked. Fortunately Shirley seemed to have gotten hold of nothing but letter-heads—blank sheets. Nan gave a sigh of relief and was about to cast them into the waste-basket after the blotter when something familiar caught her eye. For a second her heart ceased beating, then she quickly picked up one of the cleanest sheets and looked at it closely.

Across the middle of the page in unmistakable

clearness were the words—"The Eastern Silk Companies, Inc."

Nan put down the papers and closed her eyes. It couldn't be true. She must be dreaming again. Why, "The Eastern Silk Companies" was the Trust that had wiped her father's business out of existence. That name and that letter-head were as familiar to her as her right hand. What were they doing here?

Opening her eyes again she bent close and rapidly read the names of the officers of the company. Her heart was beating wildly, a sinking sensation almost overwhelmed her, but she had to find out. She had to know if Bruce or his father had been in any way connected with that hated Trust. Ah, there it was. "Secretary—Robert Wilson." Knowledge came with the cruel keenness of a knife. Bruce's father, then, was the "Robert" who had so terribly failed her father in friendship.

CHAPTER XVI

NAN brushed her hand across her eyes and forced herself to consecutive action. Action first—plenty of time for thinking later. She must get out of here leaving no trace of her discovery. Bruce mustn't know she knew this—not yet. Not until she had gotten everything unmistakably clear in her mind. First she would finish cleaning up. Mechanically, with feeling and thought held in abeyance, she wiped each little clip and put it back in the box; wiped the pens and put them away; picked up the smeared black matches; stretched a fresh blotter over the pad; shut the drawers tight; rang for Agnes to come empty the overflowing scrap-basket and finally wrote a note to Bruce.

"I think I have found a home that will please you although it needs repairing and many other things. I obtained an option on it. Nan."

She read and reread the note. It didn't satisfy. There was in it no lilt of joy that her quest was ended. Bruce would know something was wrong and he mustn't yet. Oh, well, what did it matter? Perhaps the sooner he knew and made an explanation, if there was one to make, the better. At any rate she could plead she was too tired to write enthusiastically.

She rose and stood looking about the room. Was there anything more to be done? Oh, yes, Bruce might miss the destroyed papers. She would just peep to see if there were more. She opened one drawer after another and finally to her relief discovered another stack of the familiar letter-heads. Then *that* was all right. If he noticed a change of arrangement about his desk she would simply tell him Shirley upset things and she straightened up the best she could.

Feeling was coming now, a terrible heaviness that hampered her breathing, and thoughts were darting with fiery clearness through her brain. She folded the one inky paper she had kept, clutched it tightly in her cold hand, snapped off the light and went up to her room.

Stretched flat on her back in the darkness memories became clear to her; unanswered questions were answered; suspicion found a resting place for its feet and after an hour of agony, the turmoil in her head ceased. Jumbled thoughts had clicked into place like the little shiny bits of glass in a kaleidoscope, leaving a perfectly clear picture to her mind's eye.

When the Anti-Trust Law had gone into effect, "The Eastern Silk Companies, Inc." had separated, presumably into the original companies. This was

why Nan had no suspicion of these circumstances at the beginning. Bruce's firm known as "The Perfection Silk Co." was apparently not connected in any way with the Trust. Nan wondered if the name was only a cover used to delude; if the Trust still operated as a whole with its parts differentiated by name to hide the connection. She felt her suspicion was not ungrounded.

Now then, if she hadn't known about Bruce, had he known about her? Wouldn't her name have been familiar to him even without her frank revelation of her story that day they travelled to New York together? She didn't know. She had no way of finding out certainly. Well, no matter whether he knew from the beginning or not, he had known that day. She had omitted no detail of her father's misfortune and she recalled with a dreadful dismay his attentive interest, his pointed questions. She remembered swiftly and with a growing understanding his concern as he put certain queries to her and his evident relief at her answers. He discovered that day, yet he kept silence.

Why? Why had he not made an honest confession at that time? A dignified acknowledgment of his relation to the miserable affair, or a clear explanation of his entire innocence? That would have allowed her to leave his house if she chose, or

to discover for herself whether or not she visited the hatred she naturally felt for Wilson, Sr., on his son. One or the other of these things he should have done. He had kept silence and his silence led the way to still more distressing conclusions.

It could mean but one thing. He had used the information she had given him to get in touch with Ferguson and was carrying out some underhanded scheme for marketing the machine, a scheme by which he would profit.

Her mind leaped instantly to her first suspicion so speedily banished, weeks ago. It was ugly, sickening. But this time it stayed with her, a realization that was as clear as knowledge itself. Nan had no copy of the agreement made between her father and Ferguson. Bruce knew this. He was, then, undoubtedly planning to take as his share what actually belonged to Nan and Betty and the boys.

Of course it was so. It explained so easily his unwillingness to talk business. Besides Bruce was his father's son and his father had shown no honor. Why should his son? Nan smiled bitterly at the recollection of Bruce's words to her on Christmas eve. Robert Wilson wasn't understood! Bruce wanted Nan to know him as he really was. What story could Bruce possibly invent that would ever

change her feeling for the man who had ruined her father?

Suspicion had set Nan's love for Bruce tottering, but suspicion, armed with knowledge, gave it its death blow. It was useless to try and make fire on cold ashes. Nan knew that the heart-warming flame had gone out forever. No danger of her being fooled twice! Humiliation, anger and bitter disappointment, joining forces, swept over her in a torrent, drowning her until, strangled, she sprang up, a sob tearing from her heart to her lips.

This, she thought, was hate, hate such as had conquered her mother, hate such as her father had conquered. What would it do to her? She didn't know. She didn't care. She walked up and down in the darkness of her room, her hands pressed against her throbbing head, trying to think some light into the darkness. One thing came certainly to her. She had to care. Hate was here, filling her life, turning all the brightness to blackness. It changed everything, couldn't be ignored. She had to face it. She had to fight it, and beat or be beaten by it.

Nan flung herself on her bed, her body pulsing with pain. And as she lay there in the darkness Bruce's face constantly rose before her. His words, always the dear, tender things he had said, came

to her mind. She let memory fill her, soothe her like slumber, and she came gradually to feel that a man who could look as Bruce did, who could do the fine things that she had known him to do, could not possibly be the scoundrel she had at first fancied him.

Her love was clamoring for a foothold. It had been too dear and beautiful to be wiped out of existence all in a moment. Nan began to hope there was some explanation, some simple statement that could clear away all this trouble. She would at least give him an opportunity to square himself. Any condemnation of him now was really unjust, no matter how guilty circumstances might seem to paint him.

She decided to go to him at once with her discoveries, question him frankly and get at the truth of the matter. It was the only way. A little calm came with this resolution. She bathed herself, dressed and got through the evening in a dumb, dead sort of misery.

But the next day—it was Sunday—Nan stayed close to the children in a frenzy of fear lest Bruce, in reply to her note, would appear and joyfully ring out his applause, happy-heartedly demand her company on a tour of inspection.

This is just what happened. Nan heard him call-

ing her and a dark flush spread swiftly to her face, to recede as quickly, leaving her unusually pale. By the time Bruce reached her she was composed, but her ringed eyes, so full of pain, bore out her excuse that she "really wasn't feeling well enough to go."

Bruce was regretful and greatly concerned. Nan, because the children were close by, played up and threw a mock enthusiasm into her description of the house that interested and satisfied Bruce.

"Half of the fun of looking at it is gone if you can't go with me," he said. "I'd just as soon take your word for it."

But Nan shook her head. That really wouldn't do. He would live there longer than she, she said quietly, and he must personally inspect the place. She couldn't take the responsibility.

While he was gone Nan faced herself sternly. No use to put off the interview no matter how afraid she was. It would be terrible to find out she was right—she didn't think she could bear it—but she could not go on not knowing. It put her in an impossible position. She couldn't pretend nothing had happened. The old dear sweetness had gone entirely from their relationship and she could no longer meet his frankness and friendliness. Neither could she act as she felt without giving him some

explanation. She would see him as soon as he returned.

She heard him come in while the children were at supper. With instructions to Agnes to bathe them and put them to bed, she went quietly down the stairs and stood before the open door of his den. To his quick glance Nan appeared as usual, her gold hair smooth over a white brow, her deep gray eyes sweet, her manner a little more quiet—weary perhaps—but composed. She came into the room and faced him.

"No, I won't sit down, thank you. I'm glad you liked the house. My headache—it doesn't matter. That isn't the thing."

A sharp little second of silence during which Nan's great questioning eyes never left Bruce's, while into his sprang sudden fear, then the steeliness of battle familiar to her.

"What is the thing?" quietly.

"Shirley got into your desk while I was away, pulled out papers, upset ink. I was cleaning it up—and saw this." She held out the inky letter-head.

Bruce glanced at it, then down at her.

"Well?"

The paper fluttered between them on the floor. Nan's little hands grasped the back of a chair. She was trembling.

"Bruce—please—can't you explain?"

She wanted to say more, to cry out that her father always believed there was a mistake, that she wanted to believe it. Couldn't he make her? But there was a lump in her throat past which words would not go. Her eyes begged him.

"Well?" he asked again.

His coolness suddenly angered her. She turned on him swiftly.

"Is that all you can say? What of your meetings with Ferguson? What of your new business, so new and absorbing? Why don't you tell me about it? I know! You needn't trouble. It's because you're not playing square. How could you? You are your father's son. All's fair in business to men like you."

"How did you know I was meeting Ferguson?"

"It's true then!" Pain sharpened Nan's voice. "I heard him. I knew his voice. You are using the fruit of his brain to profit yourself. It's despicable."

She caught her breath, fighting back a tumult of sobs. Facing him with head upflung she waited for his quick denial, for his eager explanation. But with his eyes steadily on her he held silence. Nan's anger died and she grew frightened. Would he never speak? Her stiff angry attitude melted into

one of pleading. She must be wrong. She had not believed all she said when she flew at him. It was to jolt the truth from him that she had accused him so bitterly; to end his cool little series of "Wells?"

But his regard, measured and distant, gave her no hint of what was going on in his mind. The silence thundered in Nan's ears. She summoned a control as calm as his.

"You can give me no explanation? You can answer none of my questions?"

From a vast distance his reply came.

"No. I am sorry. I can say nothing that will explain matters."

Nan still stood breathing hard, struggling for composure. She was bewildered. She had expected anything but this. A denial, or an acknowledgment she had been prepared for, but this sharp refusal to discuss the matter —— Nan felt as though she had been running a race, had turned a sharp corner and dashed into a stone wall. She was flung back, hurt and helpless.

At last through the haze of emotions that clutched at her, rose one more dominant than the others. Nan drew herself to her full height, her eyes two smoking fires in a small white face.

"You taught me to believe in you, and because of you to believe in the goodness of all men," she

said quietly. "You gave me something beautiful, something too precious for words. And now you have taken it away. Do you know what it means?"

A breath that was a groan escaped from the man. In that second Nan knew he knew. Someone, his wife, had done the same thing to him—and he had cared as she, Nan, cared. Surely now he would speak. He wouldn't leave her with this hurt, this hurt that would never heal because only he could heal it, and he was letting this one chance go by.

The moment passed. Bruce lifted his shoulders ever so slightly, his eyes still on her in an inscrutable expression. Nan's tears were struggling wildly within her.

"I'm going," she said abruptly.

Bruce bent his head. It was her privilege under the circumstances, he remarked, and with the detached politeness he had given her upon her first arrival, he held open the door as she passed out.

CHAPTER XVII

NAN had meant to go only to her room, but Bruce's interpretation of her words made her change her mind. Swiftly, with a hot heart she set about packing her things. Everything—everything—for she would never come back. It was all over—her dream—and Bruce had spoken the truth. Dreams were only bubbles that vanished in one's grasp. One must, sooner or later, reach the place where pretending did no good. Here she was at the place.

What a child she had been! She burned with scorn for her foolishness. Well, it was over now. Her illusions were gone, and after the pain of this had healed, she would be untouchable. Nothing would ever get through again. Never in the future could she be so hurt because her cynicism would save her. She had been right in the beginning not to trust men. It was the only safe way to go through life. However, it was easy to get back to that frame of mind. A bitter, wise little smile curled her mouth. It was amusing to remember that Bruce had first been the cause of removing her easy distrust of men creatures, and was now the cause of its return.

Pulling open her bureau drawers Nan flung up her head and caught a glimpse of herself in the

mirror. With a little gasp of dismay, she stared, then leaning forward slowly she looked again.

It was her mother's face she had seen. A transient expression passing over her young features had stamped them for a moment with the look she remembered hating as a child. Hard suspicion, cold and ugly, was there, mirrored opposite her for a fleeting instant.

"But I don't want to grow old like that."

Nan sat down on the bed. Her room, strewn over with clothes, represented the disorder of Nan's mind. Long, long thoughts they were that came to her that evening and Nan scarcely stirred until she had them all clearly laid out before her.

To grow old as her mother had, meant letting hate dominate her thoughts. To grow old as she wished to meant not revealing the disappointments that life held, not admitting—ever—even to herself, that the things that shone so beautifully from a distance in youth, were tinsel—and tarnished at that—when she came close to them. The truth of things was ugly. She could go happily through the years only by making believe. If this that had come to her, this realization of the realities of life, was not to disfigure her fresh young charm and turn living into a matter of mere stoical endurance, she must continue her pretend game.

She must pretend she didn't hate and despise Bruce. More than that, she must pretend he had never done what he had, that she still believed in him, that there was beauty in life—real life, not a make-believe existence,—even though she had discovered there wasn't.

Could she do this?

Nan drew a long slow breath.

Could she pretend nothing had happened when everything had? Could she stay on, making the move to a small house where she and Bruce would be huddled close, eating two meals a day together, enduring an enforced companionship from which all pleasantness had gone? Oh, it was unthinkable.

Nan sprang up. She didn't have to. She could begin her pretending somewhere else, with new people, in a new place. It was impossible for her to stay here.

But in her heart she knew she was running away from the issue. This was the battle-ground. She would be losing the first fight if she left now. There was a stiffness about Nan once she knew what she must do, and when suddenly a sharp memory of Bobby boy stabbed her, her decision was made.

Bob—the boy of her heart—was here, still needing her. She couldn't consider leaving now. His

need was as great as ever, though her desire to remain had lessened. If she went there was no one to take her place. Miss Burton, dear soul, had kindness but no understanding. Agnes had that, but no wisdom. Bobby's eyes gravely regarding her, their seriousness almost a reproach, came before her vision and with a sigh and a smile that was sad but somehow sweet this time, she rose and began picking up her clothes.

She would stay. Because it was the thing to do and because Bob really needed her. But how too bad that life which had been of a simplicity utterly sweet, was all in a dreadful moment complicated and uneasy. Pretending! Oh, it was only feeding on husks! She had done it always and had always felt starved. Wasn't there any real food for a hungry heart? Nan had made herself believe for so long in a beauty and loveliness existing somewhere that it was difficult to give it up now. Was it to be found only in things? In houses and clothes and such? What of the beauty in sky and music and sea? The beauty that made you ache to answer a question you couldn't ask? What was the question and what was the answer? Life held them both somewhere ——

Nan went down that night and told Bruce she had reconsidered. In a dignity that was cool and

yet somehow appealing she gave Bobby as her reason for staying. For a brief second a light flashed in his eyes but following it came that measuring regard with which he had first studied her. Nan met it steadily, and at his formal thanks she merely bent her head and left the room.

The days went by. Nan was busy superintending the renovations that were going on in the new little house. She possessed a practicality that long years of doing her own housework had given her, and the satisfaction of accomplishing miracles in the matter of high sinks and convenient shelves and closets against the conventional objections of carpenters who "never heard of such a thing," made up in some small measure for the heartache that was with her most of the time.

It was to have been such fun! This refurbishing and refurnishing of Nan's house of dreams. She had anticipated with such eagerness the domestic consultations with Bruce. And they were—what were they? Brief businesslike reports, given gravely and competently by a girl in whose eyes lay a deep sickness of the heart. Courteous thanks given coldly by a man whose face was a mask. Oh, it was bitter business! And Nan, up in her room, crossed off the weeks each Sunday night. That was the only way she could do it. By taking time

in small doses, pretending each week was her last, she could go through with it.

On a Sunday late in March Nan was alone in the new little house. She had been busy all day, hanging curtains, putting up pictures, making the beds with their cool, clean sheets, and now at last the place stood holding a warm fragrant welcome to the coming family.

Nan, waiting for the sound of the approaching machine, passed through it. She was feeling complacent, as competent housewives who have created a vision, do. The kitchen, with its blue and white spotlessness, was her pet achievement. She was glad that the colored cook was an appurtenance still to be acquired. It had been dear business, moving about in the cleanness of this workshop, slicing pungent ham, stirring up fluffy biscuits, arranging crisp cool salad on dainty flowered plates.

In the dining-room glasses and silver spread on the round table gleamed and shone in the late afternoon sun. Bright jonquils, made out of the sunshine itself, nodded reassurance of the coming of spring. Nan, glancing out of broad, clear window-panes onto the apple orchard and distant woods and hills thought she loved this room best.

But in the living-room she surprised herself by suddenly laying a wet cheek in the hollow of a fa-

miliar chair where Bruce's head had so often rested. This was really the room on which Nan had spent most thought, because it was Bruce's. She had placed the furniture as nearly corresponding to the way it had stood in his den, as it was possible. Bright red berries gleaming in a bronze vase; a lamp leaning at just the right angle over his desk; the cigarette stand, handily at his elbow, the fire burning in the wide stone fireplace,—it *was* cosy, surely. Cosy and dear and saying for Nan the things she could never say herself. She had wanted this room, which Bruce would enter first, to reassure him at once, to fulfill the promise she had made him in the distant days,—that moving here wasn't "going to be as hard as he imagined."

With a sudden rush out of the Sabbath stillness they arrived, the children curious, slightly ill-at-ease; Miss Burton's praise tumbling like a cataract of water from a full heart; Bruce, after a sudden surprised glance, conventionally appreciative. But Nan, who had seen that first look, was satisfied. The wee house had given its message.

"Little low hooks in this closet under the stairs for little low folks," she cried gaily. "Now shall we peep up-stairs before supper?"

The next few hours were almost as Nan had dreamed them; Shirley and Bob, soon at home, ex-

citedly interested in everything, dashing madly through the house; Miss Burton, flustered and anxious to help, beginning many things which she left unfinished in her gentle flurry to assist in some other place; Bruce, amused, efficient, giving Nan more help with supper than anyone, quieting the children, teasing Miss Burton;—oh, it was wonderful! For he was almost the dear familiar Bruce except for his careful restraint when he turned to Nan.

They lingered at the round candle-lit table until the last bit of light had left the sky and a night breeze began singing in the branches of the pine trees outside the cottage. A little silence fell, a silence that held a sense of peace, and safety and still deep joy. In the relaxation of the moment Nan's eyes met Bruce's and found there a warmth and hunger and hurt that startled the breath from her body. She rose hastily.

"Bedtime, chicken-children," she said gently. "Nan will tell you the story up-stairs."

When she came down again to wash the dishes she found Miss Burton had been ahead of her, the dining-room was cleared and the kitchen left in dark orderliness. Nan went through to the living-room to express her thanks and stopped abruptly at the door.

For Miss Burton had apparently gone to her room and Bruce in the soft light of a low lamp was stretched in the big chair before the fire. Nan started to withdraw, but Bruce was on his feet to check her.

"Where are you going?"

"To my room."

"You dignify that little alcove with such a name. Nan, you have thought of everyone's comfort but your own. Now I shall think of yours. Do you expect to spend every evening in a six-by-eight cubby-hole where you have no chair, no desk, nothing but a bed and bureau?"

"No—but—I am tired."

"Let's be honest a moment, call a truce and decide what our relationship shall be. Isn't it possible to be friendly enemies? Can't you sit in a room here and enjoy its comforts with me, knowing that I won't intrude in any way?"

"That is the only sensible thing to do, of course."

With her heart knocking Nan took one of the two deep chairs and picked up a magazine. But the reader may wonder if these two, so busily turning pages, weren't each of them playing the pretend game with set teeth and a grim determination to stick it through. Certain it is that Nan never once lost consciousness of the man sitting within three

feet of her, of his hands so familiar to her in their lean strength, of his quiet risings to poke at the blaze; the frown on his forehead, as he lit cigarette after cigarette.

The silence deepened about them, becoming increasingly unbearable to the slim girl in the wide chair. Contradictory memories, crowding her mind, gave pause to the fluttering pages. Bruce's look that dreadful evening in the den after her discovery. And Bruce's look at supper to-night—what was behind it? An entreaty for a second hearing? Let him ask for it then! Distinctly it was his move. He had refused the first opportunity she had given him for explaining. Let him beg for the second. Her good-night coming shortly after this was flung over her shoulder with more brusqueness than she had intended.

Days followed, days of brisk, busy beginnings when the informal breakfast was a more or less helter-skelter affair, hours of routine household work and lessons, when Shirley and Bob, entranced by the novelty and responsibility of new duties, sped the morning hours. Then came luncheon when Nan was grateful that the colored woman had materialized to do the tiresome dish-washing. Afternoons were given over to playing, and the woods on the other side of the apple orchard back of the wee white

cottage proved a fairy land for the children. They found a tumbling brook which Bob declared was heaps better than the sea because it was always "little" and "different." Nan never failed to discover something new and tremendously interesting in the fragrant depths of the trees, for spring, with its warm breath, was wooing the forest to give up the secrets it had held all winter. The three of them returned day after day, muddy, tired, happy, proud under their burdens of spring flowers.

The children always had dinner with their father now. Nan quietly arranged that so as to avoid what might be a difficult hour; but even so, there remained always the long evenings, when Miss Burton, dropping her pattering excuses and thanks, inevitably returned to her room; when the efficient Sarah, through with her work for the day, stuck her black good-natured face around the door to say good-night before she went her way to her own home down the road; when the house fell into a stillness that should have been peace and wasn't.

Nan came to dread the evenings. There was growing upon her a sense of desperation. Here she was committed to hate Bruce by his own actions, yet committed to pretending she didn't hate him to save herself and Bobby. It was beginning to be

a muddle. For Bruce, although his eyes never betrayed him again, although his manner never varied from distant politeness, so worked upon Nan that she found herself with difficulty holding back the cry that was in her heart.

For Nan wanted his friendship, wanted it on any basis. Wanted it so badly that she was almost ready to give the signal herself and that was the muddle of it. By pretending she didn't hate, had no reason for hating, she was almost persuaded that it was true. There had been some dreadful mistake somewhere and if she only gave Bruce a second chance, he could explain and he would.

Nan's pride and loyalty to her father's memory battled with her desire and between the two of them Nan herself grew worn and white. Spring with its enervating warmth crept into her pulses and after long busy days with the tireless children, the evenings, filled with a joy that was pain, became torture. Spring! and the cosiness of a dear wee home, and this unhappy happiness—it was all more than Nan could stand.

A solution of the problem came to her as so many had, swiftly and clearly. She could go. She could go to her sister's whose young baby she had never seen. Miss Burton could manage all right, with Sarah. She would call it a vacation, and just keep

away for a week or ten days. That would be all she needed.

Bruce met her suggestion with a nod.

"Good idea. You look peaked. I've noticed it for a long time." Nan's heart doubled time. "Go as soon as you want and stay—as long as you want. We can manage."

Nan's glance fell before his meaningful one.

"Thank you. That's very good of you. A week will probably be all I need. It's spring fever, I think." She laughed a little.

"I really meant that." He held her eyes to his. "You made a promise to stay with Bob under—happy circumstances. You've been a splendid sport but I think it's time you were released. Bob—there's very little occasion to worry about him. Don't tell the children you are not coming back. Just go feeling you are quite free to rest as long as you care to and that everything will be all right."

What did it mean? Was it a dismissal? Nan, up in her room, going over and over every expression and word, finally decided that there was no other way to take it. Bruce had had enough. He didn't even want her for Bob. She slipped to her knees by her bed and with her head on her arms cried silently. When the house was asleep under the whispering pines, she rose and began to pack.

She dragged out her little trunk from under her bed and packed everything she owned.

The next day Nan was at her gayest. She told the children at the end of it that she was going away to see a new baby and when she came back she would bring pictures of him and lots of wonderful stories.

But when the taxicab whirled to the door and rushed her from Bob's brave smile and Shirley's honest grief and Miss Burton's gasping astonishment, she gulped down a sob that would rise and pressed a crumpled handkerchief to her brimming eyes, for in her heart Nan knew she was leaving forever.

CHAPTER XVIII

NAN had been with Betty a month and it had seemed a year. At first—that first week—the days had flown. Betty's welcome had been a genuine one of joy, followed at once by an hysterical burst of tears, because the young sister was worn to the point of exhaustion with the responsibility and care of her baby. Nan had eagerly stepped into the breach. It gave her no time to think and she was glad not to be able to; glad to find herself busily rushing about from early morning until late at night. She took upon her slim young shoulders the complete care of the baby and most of the house. Betty was to rest. Betty was to sleep late. Betty was to go calling without trundling the baby carriage; Betty was to entertain for dinner and never give a thought to the meal; Betty was to go out in the evening with her husband; Betty was to dance and play bridge ——

And Betty did. Reassured by Nan's repeated assertion that she had jumped from the lap of luxury in pure ennui, she gratefully slid the burden from her shoulders and minded Nan as she had in the days of their childhood.

But after the first week Nan had her work systematized. The baby was good and David was a

darling about helping with dishes. Shy and self-conscious before this strangely familiar sister, he wondered if she knew how grown-up he was; how much he knew; how far back those days were when she had bossed him.

Somehow Nan did know. She managed to convey to him the proper respect and very real pride she honestly felt as her glance rested on the quiet, clear-faced lad whose eyes held bright visionings of the life before him. Would Bob grow up like this? Bobby who had been so much like Davey as a baby? She wondered, and as she wondered came a sharp pain, for she knew she would never know. Bob was gone out of her life and Shirley and Bruce.

And after the first few weeks of social gaieties a natural reaction set in for Betty. She longed for the cuddling care of her baby, for quiet hours in her neat little kitchen, for happy, idle times in her sunny bedroom with her mending in her lap and her son gurgling contentedly on the floor beside her. This meant leisure for Nan, an unwanted, troublesome leisure.

"There's no use talking, Nan-shine, work is happier business than playing."

With a fresh pink apron over her morning dress, she followed Nan out into the kitchen, carrying the dirty breakfast dishes. Together the two of them

began to scrape and stack, wash and wipe, age-old business, stupid,—but somehow enjoyable after a vacation from it.

"I think," Betty went on, "women are born contrary. They always want what they haven't. Here I've been grumbling and fussing about doing the dishes and being sleepy in the morning when Sunny wants his six-o'clock bottle, grouching around because we can't go out more,—and all the time I'm really as happy as I can stick."

Her clear, laughing eyes met Nan's serious ones and became serious too.

"It's true, Nan-shine." A brightness filled her face. "I'm bursting with the joy of living. If—you know"—she wrinkled a white young brow in her search for the thought,—"if you live this way with the right person, it's like coming into a port after a storm. Like—I don't know how to say it—like having all your questions answered that you didn't know how to ask."

Odd—this wording of Nan's own vague thought. Her silence made the younger sister look around. Nan stood bending over the ice-box, putting away milk and butter. But something frozen in her profile made Betty give her a sudden acute glance.

"Nan!"

Nan straightened and looked squarely back into the searching eyes.

"You look dreadfully, and I've been too piggy to see. I bet you came home tired,—and I've let you do everything ——"

"Nonsense, I'm perfectly all right."

But Betty's contrition was established.

"Go up and rest, or out and walk."

"Nonsense," Nan said again. She evaded her sister laughingly and went back into the dining-room for more dishes. Betty followed her, caught her by the shoulder and swung her about.

"You don't ever settle down and talk. You're always going somewhere else. Stay still, won't you?"

"Well?"

"When are you going back?"

At the abruptness of this the color flooded Nan's white face.

"Never, dear," she said quietly. "But don't ask me—please—anything ——"

Betty didn't. But she watched Nan tenderly, wistfully—and she wondered at great length about Nan with her honest-faced, adoring young husband, and she noticed that the shadow in Nan's eyes deepened whenever Harold showed an especial tenderness for herself or their boy, and often Nan, during

one of their intimate ecstasies over their own happiness, would rise and abruptly leave the room.

April with its sweet breaths; its warm high winds and flying clouds; April with its smiles and tears; its wee girlies skipping rope; its youthful manhood rolling marbles in muddy gutters; its hurdy-gurdys grinding out their whining, raggedy tunes; and its "peanut-man" whose shrill whistle was the trumpet call to summer; April came and went. And Nan knew she must face herself honestly, decide what to do and begin doing it.

But the days passed and Nan had settled nothing. A sort of frenzy seized her one lovely afternoon in early May and seeking to escape from it she bundled Sunny in his carriage and pushed him rapidly along the streets.

Overhead the feathery green of trees had grown into a solid roof arching over the streets and spreading cool, black shadows on the warm sidewalks. In the freshly raked gardens before each house, crocuses marched in straight rows, flinging their gay colors bravely to the fragrant breezes; the sunshine was liquid gold and the world was meant for love and laughter.

But Nan's edgy thoughts spoiled the beauty of the day. Only this morning she had quarrelled with Betty and so foolishly. Over the way to cook tap-

ioca pudding! Oh, she must go. Soon. Before any more of these nonsensical little differences of opinion about the way of washing dishes or training the baby or setting the table put a strain on the dear relationship existing between the two sisters. It was Betty's house and Betty's business anyhow. Why was it two women couldn't let each other alone? The trouble was every woman ought to have her own kitchen, even if she had no other room in the world.

But anyway, aside from that she must go. Her money was used up.

And then this restlessness that had seized her. She must get away from that. Perhaps somewhere else, working, she would settle down, find contentment, lose this sense of being futilely driven about like a leaf in the wind, unable to find a resting-place; this sense of nibbling at other folks' happiness and never being satisfied with a good bite of her own. Was this life? Was it to be her life?

Nan shrugged impatiently. Useless unanswerable questions. The thing was, what to do?

But she wasn't cut out to be a saint,—a picture of perfect resignation ——

Oh! It was no use, absolutely no use. Sharply she turned to go back to Betty's house. Tears would come for no reason at all. She'd better get home

and do her crying in solitude behind the vined verandah.

As she approached the square stucco house, so like the others up and down the street, a vision of the irregular little white house with its gable roof snuggled under whispering pines came to her. The tears sprang to her eyes, and when she had brushed them away she was opposite the walk leading to the front steps.

A blue-uniformed boy was coming down the street. Strangely, a premonition seized Nan. She waited until he drew close.

"This Mrs. Cort's house?"

Nan nodded.

"Miss Carter here?"

"I am Miss Carter."

He flipped the yellow envelope at her.

"Sign here."

Through the din that rang in her ears Nan heard him and mechanically obeyed. Then, still standing by the carriage, she ripped open the envelope and pulled out the telegram. Instantly the tumult within her died.

"Bob dangerously ill with pneumonia. Can you come?

"E. BURTON."

Nan smiled at the heavens above her, thrust the sheet in her pocket and went into the house.

When Betty returned from a bridge party an hour later she found Nan in her travelling suit, her face veiled but her eyes shining through a suspicious brightness of tears, like stars. She had her suitcase in her hand.

"Why, Nan! What——"

"Bobby's sick. They've sent for me. Sunny's had his supper. He's in his pen. I set the table and peeled the potatoes. You'll find everything else ready in the ice-box. Don't stop me, dear, I'll write."

With a swift kiss she was gone.

CHAPTER XIX

Bobby couldn't be so terribly ill, not really. Probably Miss Burton had just got frightened. Bruce must be away, or *he* would have wired. That was it, of course. Bruce away, and Miss Burton, dear soul, was terrified at the responsibility of a sick child. Well, however it was, Nan was glad to go. Underneath her worry was a tremendous gladness that drove fear almost entirely away. For she would see Bruce again, and somehow, someway, she would make him talk, would make him explain. She would have another try, for during the lonely, difficult weeks behind her, Nan's pride had melted away. She blamed herself for the failure of her first attempt to get an explanation of this miserable business. She had been wrong, all wrong, to accuse him as she had before he had said a word. Of course he had withdrawn into silence. She had hurt him terribly. She would have done the same thing. Thank heaven for this second chance. She wouldn't fumble matters *this* time.

But three hours later when she entered the wee little cottage under the whispering pines, all thoughts of herself fled. For the atmosphere was charged with dread. A hush was in the air, footsteps softened, the silent nursery darkened, and in the white

bed, Bob, flushed with fever, lay tossing in a delirium.

"Call a nurse," Nan ordered promptly, dropping her coat and hat in her room. "Where's Shirley?"

"The doctor's trying to get a nurse," Miss Burton, red-eyed and trembling, whispered. She was a pathetic sight, her little old body shaken and her helpless hands wrung together in an agony of fear. "They all seem to be busy—the flu, you know. Bruce is in California ——"

"He's been notified?"

"Oh, yes. He's on his way back but it'll take five days. Oh, Miss Nan, I'm so glad you're—yes, Shirley's at a neighbor's. They've been so good ——"

When the doctor appeared an hour later, Nan was in charge of the sick boy. An expression of relief came into the physician's eyes as his glance swept over the ordered room and the girl in her immaculate white skirt and waist. The steadiness of Nan's gray eyes and her calm voice reassured him.

"It's impossible to get a nurse, but I don't think you are going to need one. Just follow directions and if you see any change notify me."

Nan nodded and began her vigil that afternoon. For three days and three nights she did not take

off her clothes. Through the long, still day she sat by Bobby's bed, dropping the medicine at regular intervals between his fevered lips, quieting his frenzied shouts for "Nan," cooling him with ice-bags, watching, always watching, with an untrained but intelligent eye for any perceptible change for better or worse.

At midnight Miss Burton relieved her, but Nan, unwilling to trust the tired little woman's shaken nerves, woke automatically every hour, and at dawn, with a quiet smile of reassurance and strength, she sent her back to her bed.

Bob was seriously ill. There was no doubt of that. A wire from Bruce to Nan begged her for news. It came on the third day, and the doctor said the crisis would be reached that night. Nan decided to wait until it was over.

The gray-haired man, with his comforting air of reassurance, arrived at ten o'clock, and Nan kneeling by Bobby's bed, his thin little wrist in her fingers, gave him a wan smile. After a look at the face of the boy and an administration of medicine, he dropped into a big chair by the window. The room was in absolute silence except for the tiny ticking of the little clock.

Tick-tock. Tick-tock. Time went mercilessly on. The hours crept to midnight, to one o'clock, to

two and three o'clock. Still Nan never moved. At times her breath left her body, when Bob, paling slowly under the passage of minutes, seemed to lie in a dreadful stillness. But as the weary breath came through whitening lips, Nan's heart rushed heavenward in a wordless prayer.

Suddenly the doctor stood by her side, and at a signal from him Nan rose stiffly and moved away. The man bent over the bed. Miss Burton hovered in the dim grayness of the room like a ghost. Nan went to the window and looked out.

Dawn was coming. What would it bring? The rush and roar of a train desecrated the deep silence of the hour and Nan knew that somewhere Bruce was rushing home. Would he get here in time? Would he find ——

"It's over, Miss Carter."

The low voice frightened her as nothing ever had. Slowly she turned about, her big eyes in her white face, seeking his meaning.

"The crisis is past. The boy will pull through."

Nan's tears ran down her smiling face, then quite suddenly and quite quietly she fainted. When she came to her senses she was in bed; Miss Burton was fluttering about her like a moth about a flame. Nan wished she would go away or say what it was she was trying to. A fresh-faced, quiet-stepping nurse

appeared out of space and waved the moth away. Nan was told that a telegram had been sent to Bruce, Bobby was naturally and soundly asleep and she was to stay where she was until the next morning. Quite willingly she obeyed.

Except for her pallor Nan was herself again the following day. Except for that and a tremendously thumping heart. For to-day Bruce would arrive. To-day Nan would see him, talk to him, touch his hand ——

At every step on the porch the color flooded her white face, and her heart shook her to her heels. Where would they first meet? What would he say? What should she say to him? What attitude should she take? The old familiar dear one of genuine joy to see him? The stiff, constrained one in which she had left him? Or should she leave it to him? After all, she was not here at his summons. She had been dismissed—hadn't she better let him strike the note of welcome?

But supposing he didn't? Supposing he were as frigid now as he was a month ago? Then she would never get said the blundering, sorry little things she had over and over planned to say. "Bruce—I want to apologize,—Bruce, can't we begin again?—Bruce, it's all been my fault ——"

Nan gathered her courage. She must fling all

the old warmth into her welcome, must compel him to greet her as she wanted him to. Then, following that, her other words could easily come.

She heard the taxicab whirl to the door, heard the dear, familiar step; his voice tingled through her whole body, and like a frightened mouse, she scuttled to her room. Not here before the nurse, before Bobby! She could never do it here! She must see him alone first.

They met at the head of the stairs. Nan, hearing him come up after a quick lunch, plunged suddenly into the hall and started down. There was a smile on her face, joyous, friendly words on her lips. But the words died in her throat, her smile faded and in utter silence Nan's cold little hand met his, while his brisk, businesslike words fell like a cold wind on her spirit.

"You were very good to come, Miss Nan. The doctor tells me you were invaluable."

The formality of his tone killed her eager, fluttering joy. Feelings—all sorts of feelings—rose tumultuously in her breast.

"I'm sure Miss Burton is even more appreciative than I am," he continued.

He stood there smiling easily, one step below her, but a thousand miles away. Nan nearly suffocated.

"After all—my coming hasn't really mattered," she heard herself saying. Her thoughts labored through the pause like a ship in a high sea.

"I suppose I'm not needed any longer?"

"Why—no. I suppose not."

She nodded and went on down to the kitchen.

"Just a cup of soup, Sarah, please."

Fool! Twice now, and hurt a second time too. Imbecile! What had she expected? What could she have expected—not even here at his bidding? Well, she'd go. He needn't tell her in words what his manner made clear as sunlight. He was, of course, obliged for her help in an emergency, though he wondered if it had been necessary to call her. At any rate the emergency was past now. She wasn't needed any longer. The nurse would stay and there was Sarah and Miss Burton —— Oh! She couldn't go quickly enough. She drank her soup, burning her throat. No matter. Her hands were cold enough.

When she went up the nurse was leaving for a short walk. Would Miss Carter be here? Miss Burton was asleep. Would she mind? The boy seemed so anxious to have her. Asked for her all the time. Nan's hesitancy vanished. She nodded and went swiftly in. A faint color was in Bobby's cheeks now, and at the sweet wel-

come in his great eyes Nan's heart filled with warmth.

"Darling boy. Did you want Nan?"

"Yes, I wish I could rock."

Nan straightened and looked about the room for a comfortable chair. Bruce rose from the big rocker and pushed it forward. With his help she lifted the pathetically thin little figure and held him all bundled about with comforters, in her arms. They sat by the window, looking out at the May world of sunshine, and Nan, her lips against his dear black head, her eyes averted from the man who sat so silently, passed the trying time with stories of "Sunny," Betty's baby.

Once Bob's thin hand came up to caress Nan's cheek, a thin sigh quivered out.

"You'll stay here, now, won't you, Nan?"

Nan's gray eyes met the brown ones across the room over Bobby's head. He spoke at once, quietly, courteously.

"You mustn't think of going yet—please."

"I'll stay as long as I am needed, boy dear."

"Forever," he said with sudden passion. "Forever, Nan. Living's all—like the sun's gone out—without you."

So Nan stayed. Through apple-blossom time, through the month of scented winds, tender greens

and golden sunlight. Summer deepened into June. Bobby was up and about, pale and thin, but nevertheless quite "Bobbity," as Nan said. Shirley was home again. The nurse was gone. Nan wondered and wept and wondered some more. Should she *ask* Bruce if she should go? And receive another polite assurance that she should? Unthinkable! No, she would simply go, this time. No painful interview, no unasked questions biting her tongue, no bitterness burning her heart. She would simply *go*. Leaving a note, of course, a cool little note explaining ——

What? She found the note difficult to write, but somehow, one day, she got it done. The children were out with Miss Burton. Bruce was not due to return until five-thirty. She could catch the four-thirty train and be back at Betty's by seven, easily. It was now three-thirty.

She packed, dressed and in fifteen minutes stood behind the closed door of her room, her suitcase in her hand, her breath coming fast under her brown coat, her eyes big under the nestling hat with its bright orange feather. She would slip down now and leave the note on his desk on the way.

At the foot of the stairs Nan paused a moment, her heart in her throat. Bruce's footsteps on the verandah! Bruce's key in the lock! Oh, heavens!

What should she do? She did want to avoid another meeting with its embarrassing explanations, its troubling farewells. Nan gave a wild glance about, then slipped like a shadow into the kitchen and thrust the note into Sarah's hand.

"Give this to Mr. Wilson. I've got to catch my train."

And as Bruce came in at the front of the house Nan went out at the back.

CHAPTER XX

The shriek of a locomotive cut the stillness of the summer afternoon. Far off in the distance Nan saw black smoke streak across a blue sky. In dismay she glanced at her watch. It had stopped. She couldn't possibly make the train now. It was a ten-minute walk by the road, unless ——

She caught her suitcase tighter in her hand and started at a run across the apple orchard. It was a short-cut. The path through the woods at the other edge of the field saved five whole minutes. There was a chance and she must take it.

The suitcase bumped against her knees. Her high-heeled pumps turned her ankles as she ran and deep down in her was a desire to laugh. The situation held something of humor in spite of its desperation. She hoped Bruce wasn't watching her out of his back window. Oh—would she never get her second breath? And now that pain in her side.

Nan had to slacken her pace. The sharp stitch caught her breath from her. Half-way across the orchard she stopped abruptly. It was utterly useless. The train was already standing at the station. In the silence that was all around her Nan heard it puffing and panting. Tears blurred her eyes.

"Nan!"

Whatever of laughter there was lurking in the depths of her died at the sound of Bruce's voice.

"What in the world does this mean?"

He stood before her, his hair tossed by his run and in his eyes a tremendous excitement. There reached to Nan, through her own concern at this moment, a consciousness of a Bruce almost violently holding himself in check. But she had neither the poise nor the time to guess at the meaning of this.

"Didn't Sarah give you my note?"

"Your note! It said nothing. You had to go. But why? Is someone ill?"

Nan shook her head.

"Then why?"

"This is ridiculous, standing here like this arguing. I have to go, that's all there is to say."

Nan, pushed to the wall, flung up her head and blazed at him:

"It isn't all."

He picked up her suitcase, talking rapidly all the time. It *was* ridiculous, though. She'd missed her train. There wasn't another for three hours. Was she going to wait there in the field all that time? Or did she imagine he was going to leave her, supperless, at the station to wait? He would tell her what they were going to do. They were going right straight back to the house and after

supper, when the children were in bed, they'd have things out.

"—have things out." He flung it at her, a command and a challenge.

"Yes." Nan agreed suddenly. And in a silence as astonishing as his tumbling cataract of words had been they moved side by side back to the house.

Nan could never afterward recall the three hours that passed between the time of her return to the house and the time when, up in her room, she heard the back door slam on Sarah and Miss Burton's door close quietly on herself.

The children were in bed. The house was still and Bruce was waiting below. Nan, white as a ghost, walked quickly down to the dear familiar living-room to begin the business of having things out.

He stood quietly, across the room at the window, looking out at the sunset, and Nan stood quite quietly at the door until he turned.

"Will you come in? This is going to be difficult——"

But Nan's uplifted hand interrupted him. There was in her bearing as she stood close before him a breathless courage, a final gripping of her determination to say what had lain for so long in her heart.

"Please—let me talk first. I must—before you

do. I made a dreadful mistake—back in the winter, you know,—saying those terrible things about you. I don't see, now, how I could have hurt you so. I'm sorry."

The simplicity and sincerity of this caught the man by the throat. He started to speak but Nan shook her head.

"No. Wait. I want you to know this too. I never forgot my promise to you. I've kept it, all this time. You remember?" She repeated it childishly. "I said I'd try always to trust you, never to hate you, and I've tried, Bruce, with all the pretend-spirit I owned. I've tried so hard that —I've succeeded."

He bent closer at this, trying to read in the clear gray eyes so frankly meeting his, the meaning that lay behind the words.

"I mean this," a sweet smile deepened the pale loveliness in her face. "I don't know what happened to all my miserable suspicions. They're just gone, that's all. I don't know what you're doing. I don't care whether you ever explain or not ——" she spread out her hands. "It's simply impossible for me to really and truly believe you're anything but fine."

"Nan—Nan—dear ——"

"No." Nan shook her head again. "Don't

think you have to explain anything. You don't. It's all *right*. And now, please, may I go? I can still get my train ——"

A sudden fatigue seized her. The light in her face died as though a candle within had been extinguished. Looking at her, blocking her way, Bruce asked his question very gently.

"This isn't entirely having things out, is it? Why must you go, Nan, if you feel that way about me? Why can't you stay and begin again?"

Nan's eyes, moving from his face to the clear paling sky, narrowed with pain. For a long moment she gazed at far-away and unseen things while the lonely sound of frogs came to her through the stillness of the summer night. That, and the deepening twilight in the room made her brave. With the slightest perceptible shrug her wide gaze met Bruce's and her answer came with a startling simplicity.

"Because, Bruce dear, I love you so. Now please,—oh, Bruce! You *are* ——! Let me pass. Let me go somewhere where I can hide myself!"

He opened his arms.

"This is the only place you can hide from me, Nan o' mine."

There was a song in the words, a familiar caress in his dear voice, and Nan, looking hungrily through

the gathering darkness into his face, very quickly hid. The tears tumbled from her brimming eyes to meet laughter at her lips and both of them were kissed away by the man against whose pounding heart she lay so close.

"The wonder of it ——" he murmured. "The wonder of having you tell me this before I could say a thing. I had my explanation all ready, Nan o' mine. Came home early to tell it to you. I was going to tear away all the cobwebs of the last few months ——"

Nan's soft hand closed over his mouth, was kissed and held there. But later, with the room still in darkness, and no one but the Good Luck Fairies hovering about to know that one big chair was holding two, he returned to the subject again.

"You must let me, dear heart. It's my time to talk."

"Just forward-looking things then. The horrid behind-ones are dead and done for."

But at his first words Nan was upright, tense and still. For he was again, as that afternoon, filled with an excitement that threatened to burst its bonds. She snapped on a light, and with dismay, delight, shame and pride passing swiftly over her face, she heard Bruce's story to the end.

Nan had been mistaken—as her father had—

about Robert Wilson. He was not one of the influential stockholders of the Eastern Silk Companies. His interest was small and his opinion of little weight,—of no weight apparently, at the time of the meeting that settled Mr. Carter's fate. Shortly after that he had been taken ill and had never gone actively into business again. He had been ordered south by his doctor and kept in touch with affairs at the office only in a desultory way. On his return some four or five years later he had asked about the Carters only to learn of their failure and removal to another town. He wrote Nan's father immediately but had never received an answer.

"Dad never got it, I'm sure," Nan announced.

"I was just growing up," Bruce went on. "He told me about it. Seemed to bother him dreadfully that an old friendship went on the rocks like that. He left it a charge to me to hunt you people up and square accounts in any way I could."

"But there was nothing to square!" Nan cried.

"No, but he wanted you to understand. Dad's business policy was always as clean as sunlight. The Company he was connected with had done something dirty. He wanted to wash the slate so far as he was concerned."

Nan's hand crept into his and nestled there.

"I was young and Dad's story didn't take hold

until I got into the business myself, then one day somebody else's hard luck story came to my ears. I was roused, and memory began its work. I tried to get hold of you, found your old address but you had left. Ever since then, I've had eyes and ears open for a clue as to the Carter family. Life is funny, isn't it, Nan? You walked right into my office and two months later told me that Ferguson, who had been working for me for ten years, was your father's foreman and an inventor."

He paused and met Nan's puzzled gaze with the dear tender smile.

"Don't you see, honey-bell, loving you—and knowing your story—there was nothing for it but put that machine on the market myself?"

Still Nan was bewildered. How could he?

"I sold my business for a decent figure before the silk market went to pieces. Then I sold my house, and—well, of course Dad had left me securities. I had enough, with the help of a few friends, to form a company and get things going. And it's going!" Bruce was afire with enthusiasm over his success. "Everything is in great shape now. The machine is built and on exhibit to-day. Orders are beginning to come in. Advertising has begun. It'll mean money some time, honey!"

"For Ferguson?"

Bruce tipped Nan's face up to his.

"Nan, sweet, of course. The written agreement was, you remember, that whatever profits Ferguson made, he was to divide fifty-fifty with your father. He being dead, his share will come to you and your brothers and sisters ——"

"But Bruce!" Nan was laughing and crying. "Bruce, dear, what are you doing it for? What are you getting out of it?"

"I did it for you, dear heart, because I love you —and I'm getting back just exactly the money I put in it at the start, with interest, nothing more." He smiled a little. "I lined my friends' nests beautifully though."

"As far as I can see," Nan said slowly, "everybody's taken care of on this deal,—Ferguson, your friends, who put up the money needed later, the Carters,—everybody but the man who did all the work and deserves all the credit. Well, *I* shall take care of you. Speaking for the Carters, Bruce, I want you to stay in that company as our representative. Bruce," with characteristic swiftness her mind leaped to something else, "why didn't you tell me all this before?"

"If I had, how much would you have let me do? Would you have let me change my mode of living—for you?"

Nan shook her head.

"That is what I meant, that time you came down to tell me you had whipped Bob. Do you remember? 'There is honor in some silences,' I said. You disagreed so vehemently. Do you see now, Nan?"

She took his face between her hands.

"Yes, I see. Oh, gracious! I see so many things I never saw before."

With her eyes on his they looked at each other for a long moment. Then Nan, with a smile breaking the seriousness of her face, lifted a finger.

"Hush! Listen hard, man dear. Don't you hear the Good Luck Fairies laughing at us?"

He caught her close. "You—dear Pretender!"

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